

Sri Lankan students and lecturers speak out about deteriorating conditions

Our correspondents
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The education and living conditions of university students in Sri Lanka have deteriorated to an unprecedented level due to the government's harsh austerity measures drawn up by the International Monetary Fund to address the country's deep economic crisis. Students face increased expenses for meals, books and stationery, higher charges for transport and electricity, and inadequate bursaries to live on.

Several students at the Peradeniya University spoke about their difficult situation and lack of proper educational facilities with International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) members. Anger among students is brewing about the worsening conditions.

Bimsara, an Arts Faculty student, said that even those living in campus hostels need more than 20,000 rupees (\$US66) per month for their expenses. He explained: "Recently, the prices of meals served in hostel canteens have been increased by 30 rupees to 90 rupees. If you add a piece of chicken, the total amount would be 200 rupees. Many students eat the 90-rupee rice plate with other curries without chicken or fish".

He pointed out that there is a shortage of medicines in the university health centre. "It seems, for every disease we are given the same medicine. Students are forced to go to private medical institutions, paying very high charges."

A second year engineering student, who does not live in hostel facilities, said that he spends 35,000 rupees for his boarding room with meals.

He added: "The dormitory facilities are not provided to the second year students. The administration says there are not enough rooms to provide boarding facilities in hostels. Some of them do not have proper Wi-Fi facilities. Educational notes are published on the internet. Since the price of printing is high, we read the notes on computers."

The lack of teachers is another problem. "There are similar problems in chemical engineering. A colleague in the upper batch tells us that there is a shortage of teachers so that we should think before choosing that subject," he said.

Most of the students have not received even the 5,000 rupees bursary or Mahapola provided by the government, which itself is also not enough to cover the rising cost of living. The overcrowded hostels do not have proper water supply systems, electricity, sanitation services and reading rooms. The monthly rent of a private boarding room has exceeded 7,000 rupees.

Gihan and Akesh, two first year Arts students, have not received their bursary money even though it has been seven months since they entered university. Both are earning a meagre 1,500 rupees a day doing trade promotion activities as part-time jobs in supermarkets. As their parents also confront severe financial difficulties, the two said that they do not tell their parents about their difficulties.

Sumudu Walakuluge, a senior lecturer in the Arts Faculty, spoke about the deteriorating conditions for lecturers at universities.

"The economic crisis has compelled lecturers to take on part-time jobs or engage in business to meet their basic needs. Many are forced to work in the private sector, non-governmental organizations, or establish their own businesses.

"Consequently, they lack sufficient time to engage in research, a fundamental aspect of their role. Lecturers are expected to conduct research annually, but a majority fail to complete their research projects.

"While a few lecturers do research frequently, some of them focus on the needs of multinational companies, rather than academic pursuits, to earn an income. Some tend to withhold their research findings from undergraduate students, retaining copyrights for [their

own] economic benefit.”

Some lecturers choose to leave the country due to these economic difficulties, prioritising the future of their children.

Walakuluge highlighted the plight of students admitted to government universities based on high A-Level marks, noting the challenges they face with inadequate facilities, particularly in hostel accommodations.

He emphasised that hostel conditions are dire and hazardous, with no renovations in recent years. The reduction in university facilities steers students towards private universities, indirectly promoting private education.

Nuwanthi, a female student from the distant Monaragala district, is currently pursuing her bachelor’s degree in arts.

“My father works in the Sri Lankan army. I have four more family members. My father’s 45000-rupee monthly salary is not enough for the expenses of my sisters and brothers,” she said.

As her father is a government employee, she is also not entitled to the bursary and stays at a boarding house. As a result, she spends 6,000 rupees on her boarding room. She needs more than 20000 rupees a month to cover her expenses, including board, food, books and other materials.

“I worked as a typist on a 15,000-rupee monthly salary from 5 pm to 10 pm in a small press every day. I don’t get even 5 hours a day of sleep and am not getting proper food. This has not only affected my education but also my health,” she said.

She pointed out that even if advanced level classes are started in schools in areas like Monaragala, it will not last long. “Teachers are moving out to other areas because of the difficult conditions in our area. We didn’t have an English teacher during our school days. Our school was started 50 years ago. However, I am the only pupil who could get university admission from that school so far.”

She said that due to the difficult economic conditions in the Monaragala area, many young people are working in export trade zones such as Katunayake and Biyagama. “Many youth in our area have joined the army. There are many people who lost their lives. They join the army without thinking about life because of the economic problems and lack of other job opportunities.

“Many students are studying languages, history and other subjects, but I know that it is very difficult to find a job after studying for an arts degree.”

Iman, also from the Arts Faculty, comes from

Anuradhapura in North Central Province. He copes with his daily expenses by doing freelance work a few days a week. “Several young people from the hostel get together to prepare dinner. Most times we eat dhal and rice. My father is in the army so I am ineligible for a bursary.

“I read only the notes given in the lectures. I don’t have time to do reference work in the library and search for information on the internet. I can’t even go home every week because the bus fares are very high. It is more than 150 km from Anuradhapura to Peradeniya. It costs more than 2,000 rupees to go and return each time.”

The Inter University Student Federation (IUSF) controlled by the fake left Frontline Socialist Party and the unions controlled by the chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) have called numerous protests of students.

Both falsely claim that by exerting pressure on the government and university authorities, students’ problems will be solved, but the situation facing students continues to worsen. The IUSF- and JVP-controlled student unions politically trap students within the framework of capitalism that has created this unbearable situation.

The IYSSE emphasises that the situation in universities is the result of slashing expenditure by successive governments and promoting profit-making private schools and universities.

The present government of President Ranil Wickremesinghe is taking further measures to abolish what remains of public free education as part of implementing the IMF’s broader program of austerity.

Students need to turn to the working class and fight for socialist policies to defend education and to defeat these austerity measures.



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