

①

STUDENT UNIONS : CORNERSTONES FOR INSTITUTIONAL AND SOCIAL CHANGES

— (OUTLINE) —

1. Introduction
2. An overview of understanding of student unions
3. How student unions can be a cornerstone for social change ?
 - (a) Better contribution of students in society by polished skills through student unions
 - ⊙ Example of workshops, practice sessions and demos.
 - (b) Enhanced communication skills that enable to address masses.
 - ⊙ Quote by Daniel McKinsey, Faculty member of Harvard Business School.

(c) Ability to handle pressure and crisis in a mature way.

⊙ Research report of SWO (Student Welfare Organisation), 2022.

(d) Provides training for better leadership quality in tomorrow's youth.

⊙ Example of Ratan Tata, an Indian business tycoon.

(e) Promotion of democracy in country by the trend of elections among student bodies.

⊙ Quote by Kofi Annan, UN Secretary General.

(f) Help students explore their actual passion and potential that they can give to society.

⊙ Mixture of dramatics, arts, technology and social sciences.

4. How students can be cornerstone for Institutional change?

(a) Promote equality and multiculturalism in institutes.

⊙ By involving, recruiting and providing

changes to all students regardless of their backgrounds.

(b) Able to present the students needs and demands in front of faculty and administration.

⊙ Report by UNDP ^{on student representation} (2020) activities.

(c) Source of bringing important educational and student reforms in institutes.

⊙ Case study of ^{student} union of IIT Madras.

(d) Provide platform to gain knowledge and information through different methods other than education.

⊙ Conduction of seminars, webinars etc.

(e) Catalyst for long term institutional change and positive image locally ^{and} globally.

⊙ International sources like ASME, IEEE, ICE.

5. Challenges faced by Student Unions

(a) Lack of adequate resources to conduct events and invite professional guests and speakers.

⊙ Research study by Student Survey Programme for Tomorrow's Future (SSPTF).

(b) Absence of support and cooperation by the administration and faculty of institutes.

⊙ Quote by Marina H.W., social activist and former alumni of Berkeley School of Music.

(c) Low involvement^{me} of new student bodies due to preconceived notion about student unions

⊙ Statics by Ghulam Ishaq Khan Institute regarding student recruitments.

6. Way forward to strengthen and promote student unions

(a) Provision of adequate funds and governmental as well as institutional grants.

⊙ Funds through international forums, rebates and student affairs directorate.

(b) Proper counselling and support from faculty members and administration

⊙ Quote by Anna J., former BBC journalist.

(c) Contribution in spreading awareness about student unions to involve more students.

⊙ Orientations, Introduction ceremonies, icebreakings and faculty members' promotion of student unions.

7. Conclusion

If students are the engine of the country's car, then student unions, for sure are the fuel that heats, accelerate and kickstart the engine. The trend of student unions has been there from the early 20th century that provides students a platform to explore, develop and ultimately enhance their personality and skills. These unions play an important role in building an overall character of a student that proves beneficial in his later professional and practical life. These student unions not only enhance the communication and leadership abilities of a pupil, but also enables one to cop up with the situation of crisis and pressure. By providing different dimensions of entertainment and knowledge, they also help students discover their true passion that they could adopt as careers and excel later on in life. The student unions also serve as the cornerstones for institutional changes like bringing important educational and student

reforms in particular universities or colleges and putting forward the students needs to administration and faculty. Hence, they act as catalyst for long term institutional change and enhance the overall image of institute. Though these student unions face a number of challenges of lack of adequate funds, and absence of support from institute's administration, yet they still manage to run and do not give up. There is no denying of the fact that the student unions can immensely contribute in the social and institutional changes, however certain efforts are required to optimize their performance and output in society.

Before moving ahead, it is important to understand what basically is meant by a "student union." The term "student union" or "student society" basically refers to a group of students, probably belonging to colleges and universities, who are united or working under a common motive. This motive can be an international one like IEEE (Institute of Electrical

and Electronic Engineers) or a local one like University Arts and Culture Society. These student unions have a proper hierarchy, lead by usually a "Student President" who is elected by other students. The student unions perform several functions that include; arranging recreational trips, conducting informative events, carrying out workshops and campaigning for any objective. Hence, they are an integral part of any educational institute.

Student unions, are regarded as important feature of institutes as they contribute a lot in bring social changes through students over the course of time. The student unions help ^{students} in better contribution to society by polishing their skills. These skills can be of any type that get better and better through Student unions. For example, a student who takes the workshop classes of "Microsoft Office 365" or a student who attends the sessions of some foreign language other than

their course, ultimately they will have a better grasp over it and will have bonus points than other students. These polished as well as additional skills will enable them to serve society in a better way; whether it can be a corporate sector, IT start ups or government jobs. Hence, being part of student unions, one can increase his / her worth in society and can perform much better.

The student unions play a pivotal role in enhancing the communication skills of students that enable them to address masses and present their opinions more confidently and clearly. These communication skills are crucial for surviving in society and good communication skills ultimately allows students to talk and speak in a striking manner that can impress others. According to Daniel McKinsey, Faculty member of Harvard Business School:

“Communication skills are the key components of student societies,

The students must be taught how, when and what to speak which allow them to handles huge masses."

By working and being part of student unions, the students get an opportunity to work on their communication skill and make it better. This skill further contributes in society when these students get roles particularly which require negotiation, dealing with public and controlling enraged mobs. Thus, it helps them in contributing towards a peaceful society.

Another help that student unions do, is that they train individuals to deal with pressure and crisis situation. According to a report by Student Welfare Organization, the ability to handle the pressure of a stressful situation is 30-40% more in students who have been a part of any sort of student union. It implies that students who are associated with student unions are more likely to have control on their nerves at time of crisis. It makes them

an important citizen who when enter the professional sector especially like Bureaucracy, military, Intelligence agencies and gazetted posts, are totally worth justifying their roles. Hence, these student unions make students tough and tough so that they can deal with any sudden crisis.

The student societies also builds the leadership qualities in students that are crucial in bringing social changes. Today's students are tomorrow leaders. If the future leaders would have no capability, as seen in today's leaders, then they will bring nothing to nation but pain and sorrow. Polishing this skill requires effort and practice and student unions are that platform that provide opportunity to do so. By arranging meetings, general body discussions, presentations, election campaigns, students understand how to lead a team and manage it. This practice enables them to carry ^{out} future roles with much grace and honor as compared to people who have not been trained via the platform of student unions.

Promotion of democracy in country by the trend of elections among student bodies is another milestone that helps in bringing social change. The student unions function by a proper hierarchy; comprising of the cabinet, the assistant directors and general members. The entire union is involved in electing the senior most authority i.e. President or Chairperson. The votes are casted and counted and candidate with majority votes win and has his/her tenure ahead. This practice is the best example of promoting democratic values in the country. The students through this, learn the importance of democracy and majority opinion. They are not fond of dictatorship by any seniors and hence develop the habit of not appreciating dictatorship on national grounds as well. In the words of Kofi Annan, former UN Secretary General:

“Students Unions are the best examples of democracy. Through general body elections, they promote an atmosphere of transparency and

accountability."

It, therefore implies that student unions bring an important social change by promoting democracy and avoiding dictatorship or favoritism.

The student unions also help students explore their passion and true potential that they can serve society with. For example, an engineering student who has opted for this degree due to confusion or pressure from parents, joins an arts and dramatics society in his/her university. If that student finds pleasure and passion in arts, he can switch his career to showbiz and contribute accordingly. Similarly, these different student unions provide different chances to students in realizing their true potential and ultimately deciding which field they actually want to pursue in future. Otherwise, students who just earn degrees with no interest and skill, become a burden for not just the society but to themselves as well. Hence, these student unions

also act as "career counsellors" for students.

Not just social, but student unions prove extremely vital for institutional changes as well. The most important among them is the promotion of equality and multiculturalism in institutes. The student unions promote diversity, inclusivity and equality (DEI) by recruiting and involving students regardless of their cultural background. This creates a harmony in educational institutions that often under political influences tear the students apart. The student unions do not judge and marginalize students on the basis of color, creed or social background and thus provide a equal platform to all. So, an atmosphere of inclusion and collaboration along with mutual respect for multicultres is seen in institutes.

The student unions make students able enough to present and put forth their needs and demands to the administration

and faculty members i.e they act as bridge among students and administration. According to a survey by UNDP (United Nations Development Program) educational institutes are 80-90% unlikely unaware about student affairs and demands due to lack of student body representation. This hollow gap is filled by student unions who have the potential to bring students terms and conditions in knowledge of management. It solves many problems and make it easier at both ends i.e management and students to easily communicate with one another.

Student unions are the prime source of bringing educational and student reforms. The student unions have influence and importance in institute. They can use this power to change policies and introduce new techniques that are beneficial for not only students but also for institute overall. For example the student union of IIT Madras (Indian Institute of Technology) tried hard to conduct practical

examinations instead of theory based sessionals and written exams. Though it has not been accepted yet but still it is a worth-mentioning example of student union power. These reforms ^{can} help institutes to work on the professional development of teachers, introducing new teaching methods, changing evaluation criterias and much more which can further help in improving the rank of institute both nationally and globally.

The student unions also help institutes in educating students via different methods and techniques. These societies conduct various seminars, workshops, webinars and tours that facilitates students and make them understand or learn those concepts that they find usually hard in traditional classroom methods. For example, a student would get a better knowing of a subject, say, "Digital Image Processing" if he practices it on software in a student union workshop rather than listening to professor's slides. Or a law

(12)

student could better understand some concepts in a seminar of a professional lawyer arranged by student union. Hence through such methods, student unions contribute in producing talented batches who have expertise in their domains.

Though these student unions prove to be extremely helpful in bringing social and institutional changes, yet they face a number of challenges. Firstly, these societies struggle to have adequate resources to conduct events and invite professional guests or speakers.

It is quite evident that an event needs certain essentials like sound system, decos, mic, posters, pamphlets and standees. Also, no body is willing to share important tips and invest their time and energy free of cost. Both these situations demand funds which unfortunately are not granted to student unions. According to a research study by Student Survey Program for Tomorrow's Future conducted by the University of

Nottingham, UK, student unions manage to get only 2 to 3% of allocated budget in university finances. This negligible amount makes it hard for the smooth functioning of student unions and creates hurdles in their working.

Secondly, there is no support and cooperation by the administration and faculty of institutes to student unions. Student unions find it hard to get approvals for events and face excuses from the management and faculty members. According to Marian H.W, social activist and former alumni of Berkeley School of Music:

"Student societies often face backlash and a discouraging sort of attitude by the institutional staff and admin. This shall not be appreciated as it suppresses the sole purpose and creativity of student bodies."

Thus, the creative abilities of students fade

away and they find it extremely hard to convince higher authorities.

Student bodies also face the challenges of low involvement of new batches due to the preconceived notions about student unions. The orthodox approach of society and families that joining student unions is a waste of time, the freshmen ^{and other students} are hesitant and do not want to be a part of these councils. Due to this a few bunch of students are left in these unions and it results in mismanagement and extreme work load. This is often not handled by the unions and they collapse and are dissolved. The students of GIKI (Ghulam Ishaq Khan Institute) reported a huge decline in recruitment of students in societies as nobody is willing to be a part of those councils. Hence, it creates a huge challenge of survival for student bodies.

These challenges must be addressed to strengthen and promote student unions. Among the recommendations to do so, the first and foremost is the provision of adequate funds and governmental grants. By providing enough budget, student unions can perform in much better way by conducting large scale mega events as well as arranging famous and professional speakers. The institutional management should increase the percentage of allocated budget for student affairs. The grants coming from international forums in the form of rebates, funding or other means shall be handed over to student unions without any hurdle or with complete transparency.

There should be proper support and counselling from faculty and management to encourage student unions to perform well.

Anna J., the former BBC Journalist states:

“Students crave for one and only thing that is acknowledge-

ment from their teachers and they try their best to achieve it."

The support from teachers matters a lot in running affairs of student unions. Instead of discouraging students, the faculty must appreciate them and guide them for betterment. The student unions shall be ~~given~~ ^{designated} a faculty member who act as "advisors" and tell them about the functioning of student union as well as play key role in solving any dispute among them.

Last but not the least, it is important to spread awareness about student unions and their importance so that more and more students are involved in it. Efforts shall be made via alumni, senior batches and faculty staff to eradicate the preconceived notion about student unions and their notorious image should also be deleted. It can be done in several ways like orientations for

new intakes, introduction ceremonies, icebreaking sessions and other such entertaining tasks. This will help in creating a positive image of the student unions and will attract students to be a part of this platform. Thus, it will prove beneficial in strengthening and promoting student unions in institutes.

To sum up, it can be clearly said that student unions are like the silver lining of clouds that enhances the beauty of clouds of institute and society. These student unions not only polish the interpersonal and intrapersonal skills of students but overall glorify the image of particular institute. They help in promotion of social values like democracy, inclusivity, diversion and gender, as well as are the most reliable platforms of knowledge and fun. Though they face some hard challenges, yet they make sure to bring important social and institutional changes. It is the need of hour to promote and strengthen the student unions for a

better future of not only educational sector but of the entire nation as well. This way, one can produce talented and creative individuals that can contribute immensely in nation's progress and development.