

## Academic Performance and the Perception about the Educational Environment: A Comparison between Ethnic Minority and Majority Students Following Three Degree Programs

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### Abstract

Beneficial effects of ethnic and social diversity in a higher educational institute can be realized only if different ethnic groups effectively integrate into the educational and social environment in which they live and study. Though located in an area of ethnic majority, the Faculty of Agriculture, University of Ruhuna (FAUR) has become a tertiary education institute with a reasonable proportion of other ethnic communities since 2012. Students of minority ethnic communities may perceive the new learning environment unwelcoming, which may in turn adversely affect their academic performance. The present study compared the academic performance and perception about the educational environment between ethnic minority (Tamil and Muslim) and majority (Sinhala) students, following three degree programs in FAUR. Perception of randomly selected ethnic minority (n=53) and majority (n=83) students were determined using a modified version of DUNDEE DREEM questionnaire. Students' agreement on each of the 50 statements in five domains; students' perception of learning (SPL), teachers (SPT), academic self-perception (SAP), atmosphere (SPA) and social self-perception (SSP) were recorded on a five point Likert scale. Semester grade point averages (SGPA) of 320 Sinhala and 53 Tamil and Muslim students, representing three-Degree programs were used for the academic performance analysis. SGPA of the ethnic minority (Tamil and Muslim) students ( $2.267 \pm 0.08$ ) (out of 4) was significantly lower than that of Sinhala students ( $2.747 \pm 0.03$ ). Ethnic minority students recorded lower SGPA values in all three-degree programs, both academic years and semesters. The percentage of students having higher academic grades was significantly higher among ethnic majority students. There was a higher rate of examination avoidance either by not applying or by submitting medical certificates, among minority students. Ethnic minority students held significantly higher total perception score and perception scores with respect to SPL, SAP and SAP. It was concluded that though ethnic minority students held better perception towards the educational environment of the FAUR, their academic performance are lower than ethnic majority students. Students perceptions towards the educational environment and their academic performance were found to be two different constructs each determined by different factors.

**Keywords:** Academic performance, DUNDEE, Educational environment, Minority, Perception

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