

Graduate Unemployment in Sri Lanka: A Review of Literature

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ABSTRACT

Education is one of the major criteria for measuring the progress of a nation. It is a key element of the wealth and prosperity of a nation (Ariyawansa, 2008). One of the main objectives of education, particularly of higher education, is to prepare students to pursue different careers in a national or international context. University education is the core of higher education. Universities are social institutions, which provide facilities for the higher intellectual needs of a community as regards both academic knowledge and professional training (Ariyawansa, 2008). The employment of graduates to increase an organization's intellectual capital is not a new phenomenon. According to graduate unemployment in Sri Lanka, the highest unemployment rate was recorded by graduates from the Arts and Performing Arts disciplines (Tracer study of graduates universities in Sri Lanka, 2018). Arts graduates are heavily under-employed in terms of their qualifications and heavily underpaid. Therefore, producing "employable graduates" has become the key challenge for all the Arts faculties in Sri Lanka (Ranasinghe & Logendra, 2015). The names of Art faculties will differ from university to university, that is Faculty of Humanities, Faculty of Social Sciences, and Faculty of Arts.

KEYWORDS: Graduate, Employability, Unemployability, Arts Graduate, Education

THE MAIN EXPECTATIONS OF THE UNIVERSITY EDUCATION SYSTEM IN SRI LANKA

Sri Lankan University's education scheme is influenced by the global university system and it has been organized according to international standards to a certain extent in some areas (Ariyawansa, 2008). In the establishment, the main objective of the Sri Lanka university education is "to give a higher education and expand the knowledge and intelligence" (State Council of Sri Lanka, 1942). This vision has been

refined in Sri Lanka Universities Act 1978 as, "University is established to provide, promote and developing higher education" (University Act No.16, 1978). Moreover, Sri Lankan university education aims to provide critical knowledge about the society where students are living and working. The goal of the university is to inspire the student to explore authenticity. At the end of university education, students should be productive persons, economically as well as socially, and it will ensure great satisfaction for students, the university, and the entire society (Economic Review, 1997). The above definition

offers a wider sense of the crucial objective of university education. Especially, it has emphasized the productivity of graduates as an expected outcome of universities and the “overall satisfaction” about the results.

University education is a grave component of human progress worldwide. It provides not only the high-level skills necessary for every labor market but trained individuals who develop the capacity and analytical skills that drive local economies, support civil society, teach children, lead effective governments, and make important decisions, which affect entire societies (Ariyawansa, 2008). Universities can assist in providing the new knowledge and skills required to meet the challenges of sustainable development in a community. Universities are deliberated to have been considered important institutions in the processes of social change and progress. Hence, universities' main role is the production of

highly knowledgeable and skilled human resources to match labor market needs and for research and development.

EMPLOYABILITY OF GRADUATES

Graduate employability is a key concept in the political, economic, and social address. Employability is defined as the capability to obtain a job and to carry out the duties concerning the job effectively to the satisfaction and benefit of one’s self, the employer, and society (Perera, 2009). The employment status of graduates can vary by the academic stream. Normally the system of the university can be identified as eleven academic streams. That is Architecture, Computer sciences/IT, Education, Allied Health Science, Engineering, Law, Science, Agriculture, Management, Arts and Performing Arts (Tracer study of graduates universities in Sri Lanka, 2018).

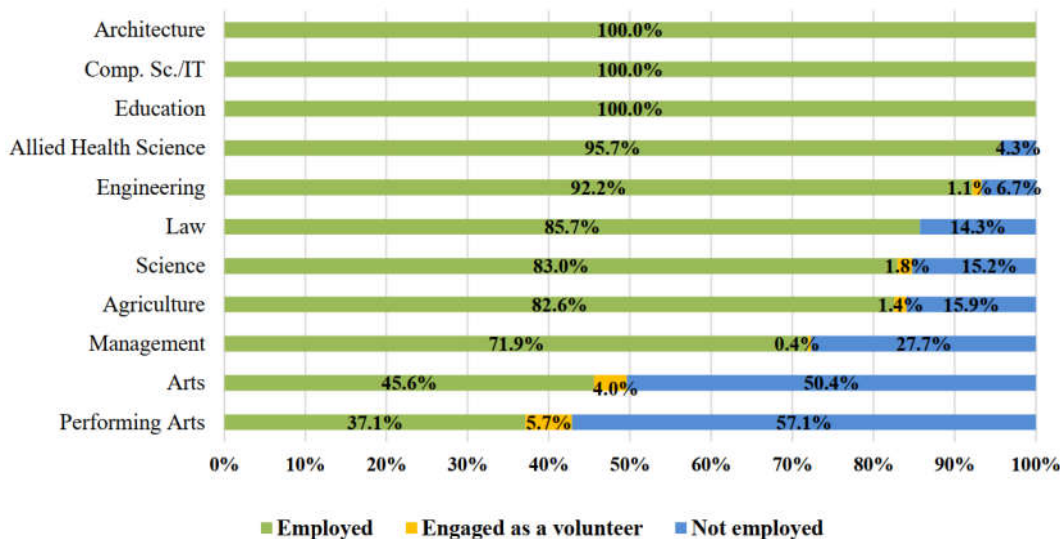


Figure 1: Employment Status by Academic Stream- State Universities (Tracer study of graduates universities in Sri Lanka, 2018).

The overall employment level of STEM (STEM=Science, including Medicine, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) graduates is higher compared to that of HEMS (HEMS=Humanities, Education, Management and Social Sciences) graduates as shown in Figure 1.1. Computer Science/IT and Architecture graduates had reached full

employment status. Graduates produced by the remaining STEM-related streams - Allied Health Sciences, Engineering, Science, and Agriculture - had achieved employment rates of 95.7%, 92.2%, 83.0%, and 82.6% respectively. However, Graduates produced by the Arts and Performing Arts streams had lower employment rates of 45.6% and 37.1% respectively. (Tracer study of

graduates universities in Sri Lanka, 2018). It is seen from the graph arts graduates show the highest unemployment.

A higher percentage of graduates of Computer Science/IT, Engineering, Architecture, and Management have found their first job faster than their counterparts in other streams. The highest percentage of Performing Arts graduates (23.1%) and Arts graduates (12.1%) have taken more than two years to find a job after graduation (Tracer study of graduates universities in Sri Lanka, 2018). Nevertheless, graduates from the faculties of Medicine are still recruited to the public health system of the country leaving no chance for unemployment. The fields of Engineering and Management also do not face a big problem in the labor market. The degree programs in management faculties are having links with professional bodies nationally and internationally. Through such links, students can develop their future career plans and necessary talents (Ariyawansa, 2013). However, the employability of graduates in Arts can be seen in decreased (Singam, 2014).

THE REASONS FOR GRADUATE UNEMPLOYMENT

As discussed along with figure 1, the unemployment rates among Sri Lankan graduates are high, compared to developing countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand (Wickramasinghe, 2010). Due to the remaining condition of graduate unemployment, higher education institutes are highly criticized for their failure to produce employable graduates (Chandrakumara, 2015). There is a gap in what should be included in higher education and how to create a competent graduate. Many studies have highlighted a number of the reasons for graduate unemployment.

Mismatch of the Skill

Skill is the ability to achieve a task to a predefined level of competence. Skills are often divided into two types, transferable or generic skills that can be used across large numbers of different occupations, and vocational skills that are specific occupational or technical skills needed to work within an occupation or

occupational group. Skills mismatch is generally understood as various types of gaps or imbalances referring to skills, knowledge, or competencies that may be of a quantitative or qualitative nature (Pitan & Adedeji, 2014). It is the difference between the competence of the graduate and employers' expected competence needs.

The generic skills that employers now demand in addition to academic skills are analytical, critical thinking, communication, entrepreneurial, decision-making, IT (information technology), interpersonal, problem-solving, self-directed, and numeracy skills (Pitan & Adedeji, 2014).

The responses of employers of labor on the competencies and performance of recent graduates reveal that there are lacking skills. For example, in South Africa, Pauw, Oosthuizen, and Westhuizen (2007) discovered that many graduates lack soft skills, workplace readiness, and experience. The report revealed that at the start of their careers, many graduates lack "soft skills", such as time management, creative thinking, and general communication skills. This is one of the reasons why many candidates are unproductive in the recruitment phase. Besides, employers believe that "University graduates are poorly trained and unproductive on the job, and shortcomings are particularly severe in oral and written communication, and in applied technical skills" (Dabalén, Oni, & Adekola, 2000).

These issues are similar to the Sri Lanka context too. Most of the research has highlighted that the skills of educated youth, mainly those of Sri Lankan graduates, are not suited to private-sector employment opportunities and private-sector job requirements (Singam, 2014). Most of the researchers also recognized practical skills, multi-skilling, computer literacy, communication skills, management skills, personal skills, and problem-solving skills as the most important skill, which lacks among graduates (Rose, 2013). Also, the skills required by the employer are different from those the graduates possess (Nawaratne, 2012).

One of the main objectives of university education is to improve the skills of students to

face challenges in society, they are forced to leave the university without having sufficient self-confidence and assurance of better employment (Pownall, 2014). There is a gap between the existing skills of the graduate and the skills expected by the employer (Ariyawansa, 2013). Therefore, there is a need to match the skills of graduates with the needs of the industry.

Mismatch of the Education

Education mismatch is defined as the lack of coherence between the required and offered educational level for a given job (Betti, Agostino & Neri, 2007). According to the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (2010) education mismatch has been identified in two ways. That is a vertical mismatch and a horizontal mismatch. The vertical mismatch is where the level of education that an individual is having is not appropriate for the job. This can be done in two ways, over-education, and under-education. Overeducated workers when the skills they bring to their jobs exceed the skills required for that job, and undereducated workers when these skills are inferior compared to those required for the job (Betti, Agostino & Neri, 2007). Horizontal mismatch happens when the type of education or skills that an individual is having is unsuitable for the job. In agreement with a horizontal mismatch, a person does a job unrelated to his or her field of study (Robst, 2007). These both over-educated and under-educated situations may result in negative consequences for the job market (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, 2010).

The education system generates a mismatch between expectations and employment opportunities (Grero, 2019). The mismatch between the education system in Sri Lanka and its labor market has resulted in efforts to reform the educational system (Grero, 2019). The private sector business leaders accept as true that this mismatch is mainly due to the problems in the educational structure, quality, and content of the educational system. Mostly, the university system has failed to provide the required skills, aptitudes, and job orientation for the graduate workforce (Grero, 2019). Also, the necessity to expand the knowledge that

youth and their families have about career options, employability, and training options to allow students to make informed and rational vocational choices (Balasuriya and Hughes, 2003). Employers and industrialists also revealed that the curriculum at higher educational institutions needed to be upgraded, as many of the graduates created by the institutions did not meet a satisfactory level of job competency. Therefore, the traditional education system has to modify according to the demand of the current job market.

Attitudes of the Graduates

Negative attitudes of graduates also affect their future carrier (Hettige, 2000). Concerning the attitudinal issues of the graduates they normally expect government jobs, pensionable jobs, higher salaries from the beginning, and a higher position at the beginning from employers (Ariyawansa, 2008). Equally far as the position and the reputation are concerned, finding a job will be an immense problem for graduates. Most of the graduates prefer to find big institutes. Hence, attitudinal changes in graduates will only eliminate this negative practice (Ariyawansa, 2008). Several jobs are available in the government sector, the non-government sector as well as in the private sector. But, most of the graduates prefer to join with government sector only. They always look at pensionable jobs. The society of Sri Lanka likewise imagines that graduates must have great and reputable occupations. Such deeply rooted norms and values in society discourage graduates to start a job at a lower level (Ariyawansa, 2013). Therefore, strategies should be incorporated with suitable mechanisms for attitudinal changes.

Furthermore, attitudes significant in improving the employment status of graduates, proficiency in English, availability of internship training during the University, and possession of professional qualifications other than the University degree were examined for their applicability to graduate employment.

The majority of employed graduates, especially in the private sector, believe that their skills in the English language were central to them securing their current employment. When

considering the way they used the English language during the graduation period percentage (52.1%) of graduates of state universities use English as the medium of sending text messages often/always. Likewise, around 50% of graduates watch English movies or TV series often/always during their University period. However, it is impossible to neglect the fact that the rate of responding graduates who watched the news in English, communicate with peers in English, and communicate with friends in English during their university days is indicated at 20%. There is a clear relationship between the levels of use of the English language during the university to subsequent employability. The employment rate is high among the graduates who watched English movies (79.7%) as well as those who sent text messages in English (72%) during their undergraduate days. For the graduates who never use the English language during their university period, the unemployment rate was 53.3%. Most of the Management and Science/Engineering degree programs are conducted in English medium. Therefore, students have opportunities and they are compelled to develop English proficiency. However, most of the Arts degree programs are conducted in the Sinhala language and provide facilities for learning English separately, students' interest in developing English proficiency is seemingly poor. Therefore, these students are comparatively less capable of English proficiency.

The possession of both additional professional qualifications and work/industry experience gained through an internship is rewarded in the employment market. Having an additional professional qualification is an added advantage for job-seeking graduates (Tracer study of graduates universities in Sri Lanka, 2018). Especially, the highest percentage of graduates who possessed professional qualifications were from the field of Architecture, (80%) followed by Management (76.5%), while the Arts (23.8%) and Performing Arts graduates (2.9%) had the lowest. About 25% of unemployed graduates believe that the deficiency of professional qualifications is one of the reasons for their unemployment. The experience acquired through internship training is also rewarded in

the employment market. A higher percentage (74.3%) of graduates who had gone through internship training during their university career were employed and the employment rate among the graduates without internship training is quite low (53.6%) (Tracer study of graduates universities in Sri Lanka, 2018). Therefore, it is important for both management of higher education institutions and students to be aware of the changing nature of employment patterns and the required employability attributes expected by employers. Mapping industry needs and redesigning the study programs accordingly would help universities to equip their graduates with the employability attributes needed by employers (Brown and Hesketh, 2008).

Labor market demands

The Ministry of Higher Education Action has been taken to enhance the demand in the job market value for local graduates by shifting them towards job oriented education system and providing them with effective communication skills and literacy in Information Technology. All of the higher education Institutes have recognized a need to generate expert, competent, and well-educated professionals for Sri Lanka. However, Sri Lanka's higher education system has been incapable to meet the labor market's needs (World Bank, 2019).

Various studies have highlighted that graduate employability has become an issue since there is a substantial mismatch between the skills acquired by graduates from university and the skills required by employers. Nevertheless, employers usually criticize that graduates coming from university do not meet their expectations in today's explosive environment and need them to produce employable graduates who can compete and contribute to the current requirements of the industry (Tracer study of graduates universities in Sri Lanka, 2018).

According to figure 2 employers' satisfaction with graduates' skills recruited during the last three years was identified as below.

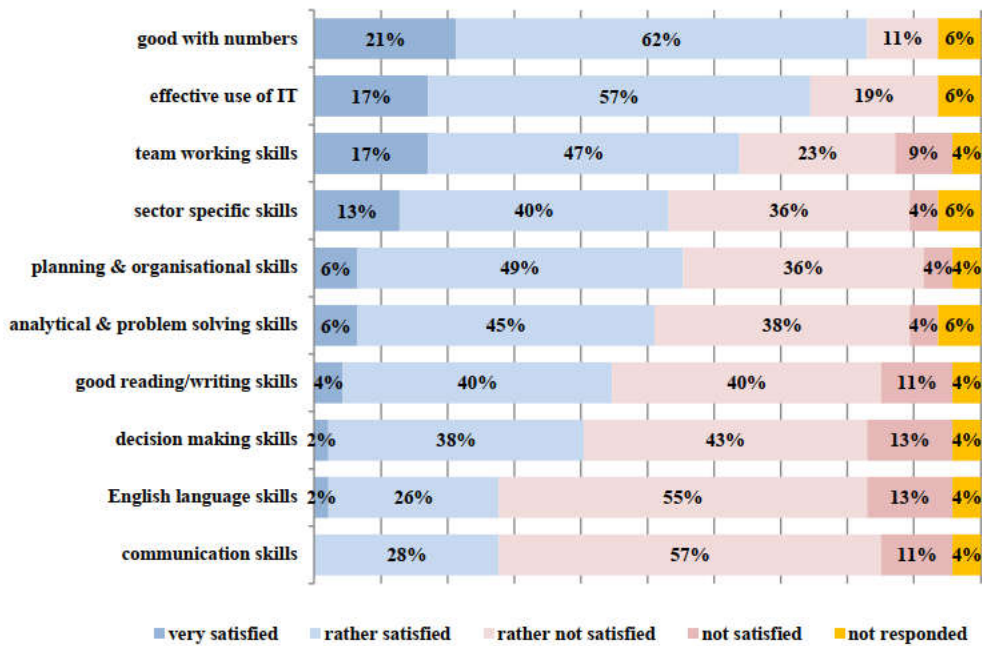


Figure 2: Skills and competencies valued by employers in Graduate recruitments (Tracer study of graduates universities in Sri Lanka, 2018).

A great percentage of employers are satisfied with graduates recruited about three specific skills they possessed “good with numbers” (83%), "effective use of IT" (74%), and "team working skills" (64%). However, only a relatively small percentage of employers were happy about "communication skills" (28%), "English language skills" (28%), and "decision-making skills" (40%) of graduates recruited skills (Tracer study of graduates universities in Sri Lanka, 2018). Furthermore, challenges faced by employers in recruiting graduates 74% of the employers stated that finding graduates with relevant “soft skills” particularly, English language, communication, interpersonal skills, leadership, and influencing skills is the greatest challenge they faced skills (Tracer study of graduates universities in Sri Lanka, 2018).

SRI LANKA QUALIFICATION FRAMEWORK (SLQF)

Sri Lanka Qualification Framework (SLQF) is aimed at improving the quality of higher education and training by recognizing and

accrediting qualifications offered by different institutions. SLQF-level descriptors describe the nature of the study and the academic standards expected of graduates in respect of particular qualifications (Sri Lanka Qualification Framework, 2015). The generic outcomes and attributes signify the expected capabilities from qualification holders defined in terms of the four main domains of learning. That is knowledge (what the qualification holders know), skills (what the qualification holders can do), attitudes, values, professionalism, and vision for life (how the qualification holders think and behave), and mindset and paradigm (how the qualification holders perceive the world), characterized as the K-SAM model (Sri Lanka Qualification Framework, 2015). The twelve learning outcomes identified by the Ministry of Higher Education in Sri Lanka as of national importance have been customized as level descriptors to suit each level of qualification. And also those learning outcomes are categorized according to the K-SAM components and the student-centered teaching and learning methods align with SLQF.

CONCLUSION

The World Bank (2019) also identified the graduates produced by the higher education institute had indicated low quality and a lack of relevance to the skills demanded by employers and also the quality of relevant education. The literature revealed that several reasons for the unemployability of Sri Lankan graduates.

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