

Determinants for Employability Skills of Arts Graduates in Sri Lankan State Universities: Graduates' Perspective

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Abstract. Universities are expected to generate graduates with the required employability skills and knowledge to create a significant impact on the economic development of a country. Continuous criticisms are pointing out the university system in Sri Lanka for the lack of fulfillment of expectations of the universities. The major opinion of the experts in the education sector was Sri Lankan education system is not producing appropriate graduates, especially in the disciplines of social sciences and management. Accordingly, the primary objective of the present research was to analyze the nature and strength of the relationship between factors affecting the level of Graduates' Employability Skills (GES) of art graduates in Sri Lankan state universities to address the gap in literature within Sri Lanka as explanatory research. Six hypotheses were tested in the present research to measure the nature of the relationship of GES with six identified factors: demographic factors, engagement in extracurricular activities, proficiency in the English language, internship training, university-industry linkages, and interactions with social media networks. Three hundred and eighty-seven arts graduates were selected as prescribed by Krejcie and Morgan (1970) using a proportionate stratified sampling method with the representation of all state universities in Sri Lanka. Findings revealed that six tested factors were positively correlated with the level of GES. Further, results showed that the highest positive correlation of the level of GES was with university-industry linkages and the lowest positive correlation of the level of GES was with demographic factors (age, gender, marital status, ethnicity, working experience, and residential area).

Keywords: Arts graduates, Demographic factors, Employability skills, Extracurricular activities, Internship training

Introduction

Education is a vital factor for boosting wealth and quality of human life and is also education considered the essential benchmark for measuring the development of a country (Park, 2020). Universities are expected to generate graduates with the required employability skills and knowledge to create a significant impact on the socio-economic development of a country (Monteiro & Almeida, 2020). In Sri Lanka, currently, there are 15 state universities, among them 13 state universities are awarding arts degrees (University Grants Commission Sri Lanka, 2020). However, continuous criticism is pointing out the university system in Sri Lanka due to a lack of fulfillment of industry expectations (Rameez, 2019). Around 46% of graduates who passed out from state universities in Sri Lanka are unemployed or underemployed (Jayamanne & Ramanayake, 2017). The Sri Lankan education system is not producing appropriate graduates, especially in the disciplines of social sciences and management (Sampath & Chathurani, 2017). Arts graduates reported the highest unemployment ratio in comparison with other academic streams of state universities in Sri Lanka (Kanagasingham, 2015; University Statistics, University Grants Commission, Sri Lanka, 2019).

Graduates are the long-awaited and final output of a university. If graduates are not having the demanding skills and capabilities by the employers/industry, definitely there is a mismatch of expected skills by the industry from graduates (Park, 2020). As Sri Lanka is a country with a free education system, unemployability is negatively influenced not only by

graduates but also by numerous related parties like universities, families, society, community, government, and also for the economy of the country (Nawarathna, 2012). Directly or indirectly graduate unemployability cause personal frustration of the graduates, lower ranking in the universities, family, social and community problems, lower level of living standards, loss of valuable productive resources to the economy, increased poverty level, Gross Domestic Production (GDP), per-capita income, national savings, national investments of the entire economy (Abbas & Sagsan, 2019).

To overcome all those harmful impacts suffered by Sri Lanka over the years, it is necessary to solve the graduate employability problem of art graduates in Sri Lankan State universities. Lack of employability skills of the graduates is the primary root of graduate unemployability (Andrew & Russell, 2012; Nisha & Rajasekaran, 2018; Lithgow et al., 2019). Accordingly, it is necessary to increase graduate employability skills to boost graduate employability (Andrew & Russell, 2012; Nisha & Rajasekaran, 2018; Lithgow et al., 2019). Therefore, the present research is conducted to identify the determinants of graduate employability skills for inculcating requisite employability skills for graduates. This study is a timely valued study for generating long-lasting benefits for the higher education sector.

Limited studies are available in the Sri Lankan context which directly analyzed the factors affecting arts graduates' employability skills. Therefore, there is a contextual research gap in the studies aimed to analyze the determinants of employability skills of arts graduates within the Sri Lankan context. Accordingly, the present study will bridge the contextual research gap while analyzing the factors affecting to employability skills of arts graduates. Because art graduates in Sri Lanka was having lowest employability rate for thirty decades (Nawarathna, 2012). The findings of the present study can be applied to change the existing higher education policies and curriculums of both state and private universities, other higher educational institutes, and vocational training institutes to create skillful output. Moreover, the findings of the present study are important to create socio-economic changes, uplift the living condition of the community and also boost the economy of the country.

Literature Review

Employability is a concept that has been discussed widely. There are plenty of definitions available for employability. Hillage and Pollard (1998) have outlined the essential aspects of employability; the ability to gain initial employment, the ability to maintain employment and make transitions between jobs and roles within the same organization to meet new job requirements, the ability to obtain new employment if required and the quality of work or employment.

Poropat (2011) describes employability as a major educational goal, even though employability programs emphasized skill development when employers were said to value performance instead. There is no doubt that employability has been a major topic among advanced economies for decades. Graduate employability is a critical indicator of the development of a country. Graduate employability is graduates' ability to identify and improve required skills and the applicability of those skills in the context of a job market (Hillage & Pollard, 1998). Graduates' employability largely refers to the possession of required skills, attitudes, and abilities to exert them in for searching employment and retention (Nabi, 2003). Further, York (2004) also explained that graduate employability is a set of achievement skills and personal attributes which help to be successful graduates within the workplace, in the community, and in the economy.

Employability Skills

Employability skills have been defined as a set of achievements, skills, understandings, and personal attributes that make graduates more successful in their chosen occupations

which benefits themselves as well as the community and the economy (Yorke, 2003). Further, Knight and Yorke (2003) revealed that work-integrated learning should encourage employability skills that not only enhance graduates' ability to find a job and perform in the workplace but also paves the way to increase their occupational success in their lifetime.

Undergraduates in universities are expected to acquire the knowledge, skills, and competencies to enter the prevailing competitive workforce. Findings of Bok (2006) also have revealed that undergraduates are supposing that university education will provide a way to improve the employability skills required to perform their jobs.

Employability skills are the crucial skills necessary not only for gain from employment but also to perform within an organization, achieve one's potential, and contribute successfully to enterprise strategic directions (Robset, 2007). Employability skills have been categorized by different scholars and researchers in various manners. According to Archer and Davison (2008), there are ten types of employability skills and capabilities mostly expected by organizations from their employees. Those ten types of employability skills are communication skills, team working, integrity, intellectual abilities, confidence, and personality, planning and organizing skills, literacy, analytical skills, and decision-making skills.

Six basic employability skills have been introduced by Stuart, Ronald and Elsa (2012). They are basic literacy and numerical skills, critical thinking skills, leadership skills, management skills, interpersonal skills, and information technology skills.

In addition, Galloway, Marks and Chillas (2014) has introduced ten types of employability skills technical skills, marketing skills, finance skills, communication skills, problem-solving skills, creativity, team working, managing others, customer-facing skills, and entrepreneurial skills. When considering the Sri Lankan context, Chanrdakumara (2014) has researched "Employability of undergraduates in Sri Lanka". He has revealed that four types of skills: communication skills, learning ability, interpersonal ability, and team works are the skills that are highly developed through the internship program.

According to Bhatnagar (2021), those five basic categories of knowledge, skills, and attributes required to improve employability skills can be further classified into 58 subcategories. Accordingly, hard business knowledge and technical competencies have been divided into 8 skills, analytical skills have been classified into 7 skills, personality attributes and other skills have been categorized into 29 skills and emotional intelligence has been classified into 9 skills (Bhatnagar, 2021).

Theories Related to Employability Skills

Social learning theory explains that by observing others, people create similar behaviors (Bandura, 1977). Social learning theory is considered the most influential theory of learning and development (Nabavi, 2012). Because social learning theory has created a bridge between behavioral learning theories and cognitive learning theories (Muro & Jeffrey, 2008). The social capital theory is comprised of three components structural, cognitive, and relational (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Batistic and Tymon (2017) analyzed the association between network behavior and graduate employability from a social capital perspective.

The social cognitive theory says that a behavioral change can be done through a personal sense of control and also problems can be solved using their mechanisms (Bandura, 1977). Social cognitive theory has been applied to numerous disciplines such as students' achievements, emotional disorders, mental and physical health, and career choice (Conner & Norman, 2005).

USEM Model consisting of Understanding; Skills or skillful practice; Efficacy beliefs, and Meta-cognition, provides a useful overview of the influences on employability and aims to increase the 'scientific' aspect of employability thinking within higher education

(Knight & Yorke, 2003).

Demographic Factors and Graduate Employability

The demographical factors studied in the research; work experience, age, degree type, disability, and ethnicity will be affected to determine the level of employability of the graduates (Byrne, 2020). Gender is playing a moderating role in determining the level of employability skills (Monterio et al., 2016; Donald et al., 2017). Gender is a vital demographic factor influencing the level of employability skills and male students are having a higher level of perceived employability than females (Pitan & Mullar, 2019). Age is another important factor affecting graduate employment (Artess et al., 2011; Devaney & Roberts, 2012; Smith et al., 2000; Urwin & Di Pietro, 2005). Further, Smith et al. (2000) found that age has an impact on graduate employment prospects but there is no clear-cut age that can be considered as a 'definite' age having a threshold impact on graduates' employment potential.

Engagement in Extracurricular Activities and Graduate Employability

Extra curricula activities may affect the improvement of various skills of the graduates. Engaging more in extracurricular activities while studying at university is providing an opportunity to improve personal confidence and effective communication skills (Stuart, Lido, & Morgan, 2008). Accordingly, the value of extracurricular activities enables to development of employability (Watson, 2011). Engaging in extracurricular activities such as sports, arts, and volunteering can create opportunities for graduates to highlight themselves more than their peers (Stevenson & Clegg, 2012). In addition to the academic performance of the graduates, most employers are expecting motivation, interest, organization fit, skills, and experiences in group work as desirable criteria (Pennington, Mosley, & Sinclair 2013). Accordingly, engagement in extracurricular activities is an important way of improving the required employability skills and attributes of the graduates (Milner et al., 2016). Further, Pinto and Ramalheria (2017) explained that the combination of academic performance and engagement in extracurricular activities in the university will affect the improvement of graduate employability skills.

Proficiency in English Language and Graduate Employability

Proficiency in the English language aid to increase employability for the graduates, especially for the arts graduates as the majority of the arts graduates are reading the degree in Sinhala or Tamil languages (Rameez, 2019). Further, Rameez (2019) found that proficiency in the English language will cause self-confidence and motivation among the graduates which is required for employability. Even though many languages are spoken in the world English language is the leading international language in the world (McKay, 2002). According to Dharaji (2017), the English language is considered the universal language due to five unique features of English language; the English language is the most commonly used as international communication media among the people in the world, and English is the language used for science, research, aviation, computers, diplomacy and tourism, English enables people to select more career opportunities in the government sector, private sector in the own country or in abroad, the English language is the language of international media such internet which provide an opportunity to access more online resources and English is the language of Hollywood, entertainment and social media. When considering the Sri Lankan context, Sri Lankan society is comprised of Sinhalese (Buddhists) as the major ethnic group and Tamils (Hindus) and Muslims as the minority ethnic groups. Accordingly, Sinhala and Tamil languages are considered the official languages in Sri Lanka as defined by the constitution. However, English is the second accepted language widely used for educational, research, scientific, and commercial purposes in Sri Lanka. However, approximately only

48% of the Sri Lankan population can speak English fluently (Rameez, 2019). The ability to communicate properly through English is a vital factor in improving employability (Pillai et al., 2019).

Internship Training and Graduate Employability

The internship training component is a valuable opportunity for the undergraduates of the management degree program in Sri Lanka. The objective of introducing internships to undergraduate programs is to improve academic performance and future employability skills. The internship is affecting not only the development of employability skills but also the internship causes economic development by reducing unemployment in the country. There is a higher unemployment ratio among educated people in Sri Lanka in comparison with others. The major complaint of the employers is the lack of employability skills and capabilities of the Sri Lankan graduates. Accordingly, the internship will cause to produce employees who match the required skills and competencies of the industry. However, an internship can be seen as complementary to educational achievements because employability skills are improved with practice. There are aspects of every profession that cannot be learned in the classroom but must be learned where the profession is practiced (Glasman, 1996). Accordingly, most universities and other higher education institutes in the world have included internship training components in their curriculum. Because of at present the value of the internship program has been identified highly by most universities in the world. The findings of Amarathunga (2022) revealed that the internship program causes to increase in the level of employability skills of the management undergraduates in Sri Lankan state universities. Four ways of enhancing students' employability skills have been introduced by Yorke (2003) and work experience is one of the ways to enhance employability skills. Therefore, many scholars have revealed that an internship is a strategy for securing the right career opportunity soon after graduation.

University-Industry Linkages and Employability

Proper linkage with the industry is gaining mutual benefits. Frequent interactions between university and industry affect to improve the work-related knowledge, consulting opportunities, and better learning opportunities for the undergraduates (Gertner et al., 2011). After university, the industry is considered the second important player that effectively contributes to the skill development of graduates via proper university-industry linkages (Etzkowitz, 2002). According to Ishengoma and Vaaland (2016), smooth university-industry linkages strongly affect to increase in employability. Ashraf et al. (2018) also found that university-industry linkage has four components; mutually interactive, expressed by the informational and physical relations, and socio-economic relationships, about technology and there is a relationship between proper university-industry linkages with graduate employability. Further, Ashraf et al. (2018) explained that collaborative training and educational activities, collaborative consultancy activities, and collaborative contract research will be created competitive advantages that influence graduate employability.

Interactions with Social Media Networks and Graduate Employability

Social media has become an essential component connected with most individuals in the present world. Frequent online social interactions cause another aspect of interacting with professionals, formal/informal linkages with different parties, and help to increase the digital literacy of the individuals (Benson et al., 2014). Networking is individual behavior that causes improvement in the quality and quantity of relationships and thus affects to shape of social capital (Wolf & Moser, 2009). Networking can affect the relational dimensions of social capital as more interactions with others makes people more comfortable with each

other and uplift cooperation (Levin et al., 2016). Batistic and Tymon (2017) analyzed the association between network behavior and graduate employability from a social capital perspective. Findings of the same study proved that networking is positively affecting to access more information and resources. Further, Batistic and Tymon (2017) have explained that networking behavior is comprised of three components for increasing employability; the first component is networking behavior promotes the system of interconnected and cooperating individuals with a higher possibility to access information. Because of the wider network relationships have a higher possibility to find an employment opportunity as job seekers are conveniently receiving information on employability opportunities. The second component is social networking provides credentials for job seekers by suggesting that the seekers are capable to perform the relevant job. Because some social contacts with institutes and persons have greater influencing power than others (Van Hoyer et al., 2009). The third component is a good networking effect to create self-identity, status, and creating emotional support. Accordingly, because of those components networking behavior is expected to be approached more resources, information, and persons to improve employability (Batistic & Tymon, 2017).

Methodology

The current study employed an explanatory research strategy, with a primary emphasis on evaluating hypotheses developed based on the results of empirical research. The fact that the data was only collected once and was quantified and objectively assessed makes this study cross-sectional and quantitative. Considering the different strata levels of the population of the present research, the structure of the proposed sample has been determined. The art graduates who graduated from 2019 to 2021 have been considered as the population as there is a uniformity of the curriculums and other conditions of the graduates passed out between the year 2019 to 2021. According to the Morgan's table produced by Krejcie and Morgan (1970), the sample size for the present research was determined as 387 out of 37631 arts graduates' population of the present research. A proportionate stratified sampling method was applied to collect the data of the present research.

The primary data collection tool of the present research is a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire is expected to be self-administrated and self-completed by the respondent. Secondary data for the present research was collected from annual reports and publications of the University Grants Commission, Sri Lanka, the Department of Census and Statistics, and the Central Bank of Sri Lanka. Spearman's Correlation (nonparametric correlation) analysis using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23 was applied to determine the strength of the relationship between GES and every six factors considered in the present research as a measurement of the data collected through the questionnaire is ordinal.

Hypotheses

The following six hypotheses were tested in the present research.

H:1 – There is a positive relationship between Demographic Factors (age, gender, marital status, ethnicity, working experience, and residential area) and GES of art graduates in the state universities of Sri Lanka.

H:2 – There is a positive relationship between Extracurricular Activities and GES of art graduates in the state universities of Sri Lanka.

H:3 – There is a positive association between Proficiency in the English Language and GES of art graduates in the state universities of Sri Lanka.

H:4 – There is a positive association between Internship Training and GES of art graduates in the state universities of Sri Lanka.

H:5 – There is a positive relationship between University-Industry Linkage and GES of art graduates in the state universities of Sri Lanka.

H:6 – There is a positive association between Interactions with Social Media Networks among GES of art graduates in the state universities of Sri Lanka.

Results and Discussion

Based on the descriptive statistics of the current study, Table 1 shows the demographic profile of the 387 respondents. Table 1 provides percentages and frequencies for the demographic characteristics of the respondents.

Table 1. Demographic profile of the respondents

Description	Frequency	Percentage	
Gender	Male	196	51%
	Female	191	49%
Class Received for the Degree	First Class Degree	27	7%
	Second Class - Upper	58	15%
	Second Class - Lower	133	34%
	General Pass	169	44%
Residential Area	Urban	98	25%
	Semi-urban	197	51%
	Rural	92	24%
Ethnicity	Sinhalese	302	78%
	Tamil	51	13%
	Muslim	34	9%
	Other	0	0%

(Source: Findings of the Survey Data)

A summary of the results generated from nonparametric correlation analysis is depicted in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of Spearman’s Correlation

Variables	Correlation coefficient (r)	Sig. Value (p)
Demographic Factors & GES	0.382	0.000
Extra-Curricular Activities & GES	0.472	0.000
Proficiency in English & GES	0.534	0.001
Internship Training & GES	0.508	0.000
University-Industry Linkage & GES	0.682	0.002
Interactions with Social Media Networks & GES	0.621	0.000

(Source: Findings of the Analysis)

Results of H:1- There is a positive relationship between Demographic Factors (age, gender, marital status, ethnicity, working experience, and residential area) and GES of art graduates in the state universities of Sri Lanka.

As per the results of the nonparametric correlation, test is significant ($r = .382, p < 0.05$). H:1 was accepted and it was revealed that there is a positive relationship between Demographic Factors (age, gender, marital status, ethnicity, working experience, and residential area) and GES of art graduates in the state universities of Sri Lanka.

Results of H:2 – There is a positive relationship between Extracurricular Activities and GES of art graduates in the state universities of Sri Lanka.

Based on the results of the nonparametric correlation, test is significant ($r = .472$, $p < 0.05$). H:2 was accepted and it was revealed that there is a positive relationship between Extracurricular Activities and GES of arts graduates in the state universities of Sri Lanka.

Results of H:3 – There is a positive association between Proficiency in the English Language and GES of art graduates in the state universities of Sri Lanka.

As per the results of the nonparametric correlation, the test is significant ($r = .534$, $p < 0.05$). H:3 was accepted and it was revealed that there is a positive association between Proficiency in the English Language and GES of art graduates in the state universities of Sri Lanka.

Results of H:4 – There is a positive association between Internship Training and GES of art graduates in the state universities of Sri Lanka.

According to the results of the nonparametric correlation, test is significant ($r = .508$, $p < 0.05$). H:4 accepted and it was revealed that there is a positive association between Internship Training and GES of art graduates in the state universities of Sri Lanka.

Results of H:5 – There is a positive relationship between University-Industry Linkage and GES of art graduates in the state universities of Sri Lanka.

Based on the results of the nonparametric correlation, test is significant ($r = .682$, $p < 0.05$). H:5 accepted and it was revealed that there is a positive relationship between University-Industry Linkage and GES of art graduates in the state universities of Sri Lanka.

Results of H:6 – There is a positive association between Interactions with Social Media Networks among GES of art graduates in the state universities of Sri Lanka.

As per the results of the nonparametric correlation, test is significant ($r = .621$, $p < 0.05$). H:6 was accepted and it was revealed that there is a positive association between Interactions with Social Media Networks on GES of art graduates in the state universities of Sri Lanka.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Findings revealed that GES positively correlated with six types of determinants tested in the present research. Further, results showed that the highest positive correlation of GES was with university-industry linkage and the lowest positive correlation of GES showed with demographic factors. Accordingly, it has been exhibited that university-industry linkage is highly causing to enhance the level of GES in comparison with considered other factors of the present research. University-industry linkages caused to increase in the employability of the students as a result of the internship, joint projects, and research (Ashraf et al., 2018, Ishengoma & Vaaland, 2016). University-industry collaborations needed to be fully developed in developing countries like Sri Lanka (Wickramasinghe & Malik, 2018). There are several types of strategies for establishing university-industry collaborations in a country. However, there are affordable specific methods that can be established in developing countries like Sri Lanka (Guimon, 2013). To maintain a higher level of intensity of collaboration research partnerships, sharing research services, and shared infrastructure just like laboratories, equipment, and technological devices can be applied. Moreover, academic entrepreneurship and human resource training such as internship training can be implemented in middle-level intensity. Further, using commercialization of intellectual properties like patents and licenses, sharing the findings of scientific research, and also maintaining social relationships conferences, meetings, and social networks can be introduced at a lower level of intensity (Guimon, 2013). Amarathunga and Wijethunga (2021) revealed that social capital is significantly influencing the work readiness of undergraduates and maintaining vigorous university-industry linkages is recommended as one of the productive methods to uplift the relationships with industry. Accordingly, it is recommended to universities strengthen the university-industry linkages using appropriate strategies such as conducting collaborative

research and development activities with the industry and providing consultations, seminars, and workshops. Because cordial university-industry linkages will cause to attract more interns from the universities as well as provide an effective internship period for the interns. Moreover, the graduate employability skills of the students will be enhanced as a result of that process.

Interactions with social networks showed the second-highest association with graduate employability skills out of the analyzed factors of the present study. Networking in social media becoming increasingly crucial in the higher education sector as well (Stathopoulou, Siamagka & Christodoulides, 2019). Social media usage during the COVID-19 pandemic situation has increased significantly than normal time usage (Kaya, 2020). Currently, social networks are used as a tool for the recruitment of employees as well as social networking influences the level of employability as well (Sutherland, Freberg & Driver, 2019). However, it is necessary to concentrate for the graduates on the relevance of social media use, security or privacy, and the level of usage of social media platforms (Stathopoulou, Siamagka & Christodoulides, 2019). Because Sutherland, Freberg and Driver (2019) have found that unprofessional social media behavior has an impact on graduate employability as prospective employers are influenced by the graduates' presence on social media platforms. Sutherland, Freberg and Driver (2019) have observed the ten most unprofessional social media behaviors according to employers: using social media to intentionally cause harm to others, using social media to intermediate others, sharing confidential information about the current or former employer, posts with discriminatory comments, posting content about taking drugs, posting sexually suggesting photos or videos, posting negative comments about a current or former employer, posting negative comments about current or former workmates, using the copyrighted materials without the owners' permission and finally, posting comments about current employers/workmates without their permission. Hence, it is recommended to graduates maintain professional and ethical behavior on social media presence and online activities to build a positive brand image for prospective employers and referees. Accordingly, the decision-makers, planners, and policymakers of the government higher education system ought to consider implementing the findings of this study because it may assist in enhancing the level of employability skills of graduates in government universities in Sri Lanka. Accordingly, the findings of the present research have implications for all the related stakeholders involved. Finally, the results of the study add knowledge to the existing literature and therefore act as a catalyst for future studies.

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