

FACTORS INFLUENCING SUCCESSFUL EMPLOYABILITY OF ARTS GRADUATES

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ABSTRACT

Graduate unemployment has been a serious problem faced by successive Sri Lankan governments for many years. Although the qualified group of the state universities represents the excellent portion of GCE (General Certificate of Education) Advanced Level passed students, they face enormous problems in getting into employment. Producing quality graduates with skills demanded by the job market has been a challenge especially to the faculties which offer degrees in arts subjects. This study focuses on identifying the influencing factors on employability of BA graduates. The factors considered were: Medium of instructions in the degree course, Class obtained and IT skills. The waiting time of graduates for the first job, Initial salary and Unemployment were taken as the indicators of employability. Non-parametric statistical tools including: Mann-Whitney U-test, Kruskal-Wallis test and Chi-squared test were used for testing the hypothesis concerning the relationship between employability and the factors selected. The research found that the medium of degree and IT skills are the main factors affecting employability of Arts graduates. The final grade of the Degree determines the ability of the graduates to demand high salaries. Additionally, a large percentages of respondents suggested that industrial training (45%), additional English modules (37%), and IT modules (31%) would improve the quality of these graduates.

KEYWORDS: *Employability, Graduate Unemployment, Arts Degrees, Curriculum Development.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Irrespective of numerous research findings and policy proposition by the academics and professionals, successive governments in power have been trying to address the unemployment problem of graduates. It is not overstated to describe that the undergraduates of Sri Lankan state universities as the best who qualify to enter the university system through a highly competitive GCE (A/L) (General Certificate of Education (Advanced Level)) examination. However it is

quite distressing that these graduates face enormous problems in getting into employment. As suggested by many studies done within Sri Lankan context (e.g. Senaratna et al (2001), Tharanganie et al (2011) and Vidanapathirana and Gamini (2009)) the possible underlying causes leading to graduate unemployment are the language and IT skills mismatch resulting in the lack of soft skills and entrepreneurial skills of job seekers.

According to the Department of Census and Statistics of Sri Lanka, graduate unemployment is a critical problem which should be addressed by responsible bodies without more delay. Ad-hoc solutions such as recruiting the graduates to the state sector as trainees will not solve the problem. Such solutions will also create frustration within the graduates, as many of them will be absorbed into job positions, which are far below than they expected. Producing quality graduates with required competencies has become a challenge for many years to the universities, especially to the faculties which offer arts related degrees.

1.1 RESEARCH PROBLEM

How do the degree programmes of the Sabaragamuwa University face the challenge of producing BA graduates with skills demanded by the job market?

1.2 BA DEGREE AT SABARAGAMUWA UNIVERSITY

Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka is one of the recently established universities mainly for the purpose of creating graduates with necessary capabilities to face the challenge of job market. In line with this corporate goal of the university, Faculty of Social Sciences and Languages offers three year and four year special degrees, deviating from tradition in many of Arts faculties in other universities.

The Faculty was offering three-year special degrees through its three departments: Economics and Statistics, Social Sciences, and Languages. A unique feature of the BA at Sabaragamuwa University, amongst arts faculties in other Sri Lankan universities is that students are able to select one subject as the Major (49 credits) another subject as the Minor (36 credits). The Minor subject is the second subject, which students should also study to a certain depth. From the second year onwards students are expected to take three course units from the Major Subject and two course units from the Minor Subject for each semester. In addition to the areas of specialization, the English Language Teaching Department offers English Language courses (11 credits) throughout the student's university career. Students must complete the English language requirements before obtaining the degree. In addition students should follow a specified number of courses in Information Technology (12 credits), offered by the Center for Computer Studies.

Elementary subjects are offered only in English medium by the Department of Social Sciences and Department of Economics and Statistics in the first year first semester. Preparatory subjects are also offered only in English medium by the Department of Languages to prepare students to seek knowledge in various languages. Both elementary and preparatory subjects hold two credits. The evaluation system has been set up so that students who do not perform well in these subjects will not be unenthusiastically affected. The purpose is only to encourage students to follow major or minor subjects in English medium.

In the second semester of the first year, students are required to select any three foundation subjects amongst those offered for academic specialization (major and minor subjects). Selection for Major subjects in the second year will depend on performance in such subjects in the second semester of the first year. Other than the subjects currently available, the programme is reviewed each year so that other subject areas of particular relevance to the modern world may be introduced, if there is sufficient demand and facilities are available to offer them at appropriate academic levels.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Evidences are largely available on inefficiency and/or less reliability of people in Sri Lankan state university education. Hutchens (1988) presented a new form of evidence supporting the hypothesis that job opportunities decline with age. Though university education is free, it can accommodate only a limited number of students. Students who study in Western countries or Australia spend a huge amount of money annually for their education. Following paragraphs illustrates the perception of Sri Lankan parents on local university education.

The scenario in Sri Lanka is that even if a student gets a place in a local university there several barriers for their education. Teaching, administrative staff and students “go on strikes” mean that universities are forced to close regularly. Students do not get into the popular/preferred universities, and/or preferred course. “Ragging” an induction programme totally run by senior students, has caused students to even lose their lives and many to give up the education. A large number of graduates are unemployed. Parents with the capacity to choose are increasingly unwilling to send their children to Sri Lankan universities and seek overseas educational opportunities.

The paper prepared (2004) by the Department of Census and Statistics (DCS) has made an attempt to analyze the past trends in employment and unemployment during the last four to five decades based on the data collected through the censuses and surveys conducted by the department. This study has found the following as major reasons for graduate unemployment problem: the age at which they complete the university education and inadequate knowledge of English language. Reluctance of the private sector employers to recruit graduates is possibly due to these reasons and also due to the misconception that all graduates are radicals.

Reluctance of the graduates to enter the private sector, because of the attitudes of the co-workers, towards them, who are less qualified, but may be more conversant in English and IT. The study of Vidanapathirana and Gamini (2009) confirmed the direct influence of the English language proficiency on the level of success of arts (BA) graduates. Tharanganie et al (2011) provided a number of suggestions for including and expanding IT modules in undergraduate degree programmes in order to enhance the quality of entrants. Following are some of the suggestions made by the DCS to rectify the problem of unemployment graduates.

- Universities should take in students who are qualified to enter as soon as possible, without making them for a long period, waiting after they sit for the GCE (A/L) examination.

- English language should be taught, throughout the University time and not just at the beginning of the course. More qualified teaching staff, language laboratories and modern technology to learn English is needed.
- In addition to the formal subjects, special modules should also be introduced, which will improve the skills in different subject areas, which are currently in demand, which will equip them for private sector jobs.
- Private sector should be encouraged to recruit more graduates and to provide on the job training to undergraduates (may be during the university vacations)

Faculty of Social Sciences and Languages of Sabaragamuwa University has attempted to develop their curricula adhering many of the above suggestions and this research somewhat evaluates the effectiveness of those attempts.

3. OBJECTIVES AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This research aimed to find whether there is any effect of the factors such as medium of instructions of degree course, class obtained, IT skills on the waiting time for the first job, initial salary, and unemployment. The trends and demand in current job market provided the basis for selecting these factors. Studying the relationships between above variables was also interested. View of the BA graduates on future improvements to their degree programmes was also investigated using several hypotheses.

The normal perception on BA degrees is not so attractive due to that BA graduates have relatively more difficulties than other graduates when finding job opportunities. The challenge of making these degrees more acceptable in the industry can be eased through investigating current drawbacks and required improvements. Therefore, findings of this study will provide valuable insights to university administration including the government, academics and other relevant bodies who participate in develop curricula for arts degree programmes. Since the study was based on data collected from BA graduates having three-year special degree, the findings will be reliable and contain the experiences of them which are extremely significant when adjusting existing degree programmes of the same type.

3.1 LIMITATIONS

The study has taken the data of BA graduates passed out from the Sabaragamuwa University only. The programmes of the university are somewhat deviated from the traditional arts faculties of other Sri Lankan national universities. Therefore, the results of this study should not be generalized to all the arts faculties in Sri Lanka. The study has used only non-parametric statistical techniques during its analysis because of non-normal behavior data. This restricted the ability to study the interaction effects of factors: medium of instructions of degree, class or pass obtained, and IT skills etc.

4. METHODOLOGY AND HYPOTHESES

The study used primary data which have been collected from the students of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Languages of Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka. Therefore, the results obtained by this study would be especially valid for arts faculties which conduct programmes of similar nature. A detailed statistical analysis was then carried out on these data to test several hypotheses formulated according to the objectives of the study.

4.1 THE SAMPLE

Data were collected through a mailed questionnaire. The questionnaire was sent to 233 graduates and only 85 recipients responded. The composition of the sample is illustrated in Figure 1.

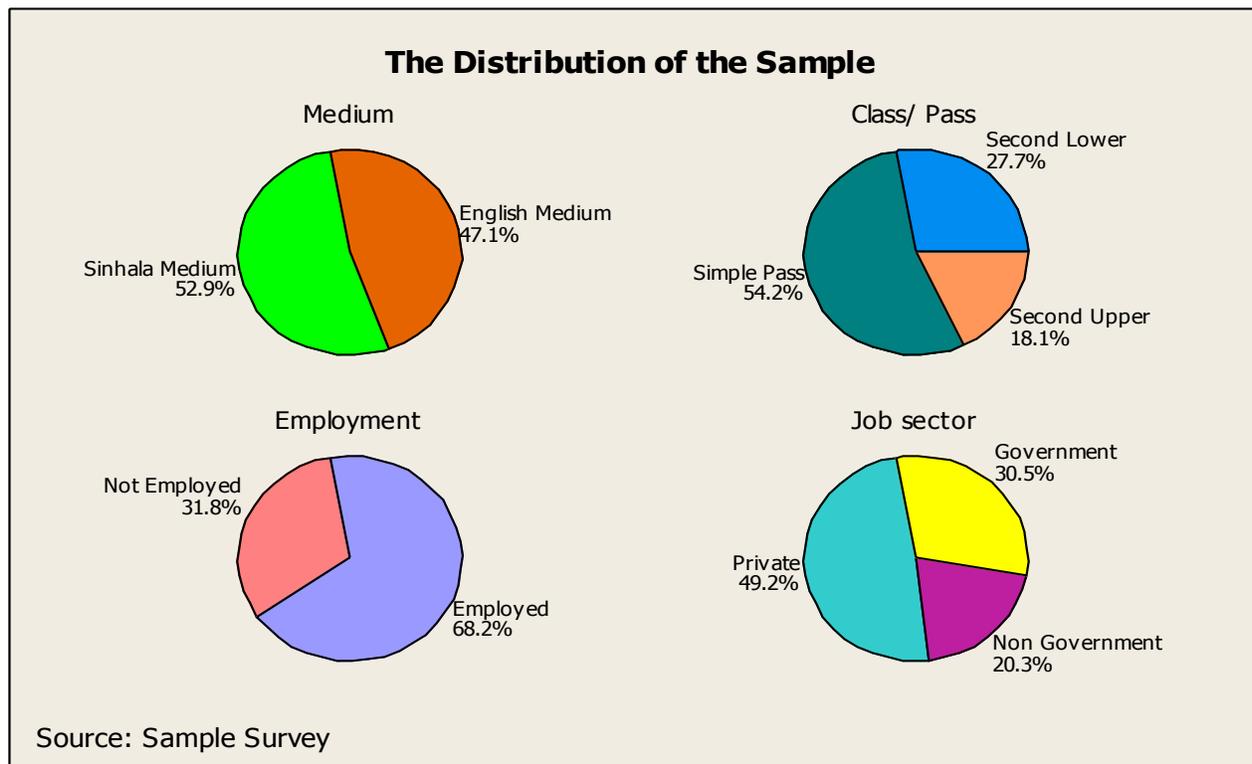


FIGURE 1: COMPOSITION OF THE SAMPLE (N = 85)

The sample represented about 37% response rate. Data for the factors: medium of degree, class/pass and IT skills were obtained in categorical form. Whether the students have followed Computer Science as a minor subject was taken as the indicator of IT skills. The waiting time for the first job was taken in number of days. In order to identify the influential factors on employability, following hypotheses were formulated (Only alternative hypotheses are provided) after reviewing literature on graduate employability in Sri Lanka.

H_{1A}: The medium of degree has an effect on the median length of waiting time for the first job

H_{1B}: The class/pass obtained has an effect on the median length of waiting time for the first job

H_{1C}: IT skills of graduates cause to reduce the median length of waiting time for the first job

H_{1D}: The medium of degree has an effect on the median initial salary of the first job

H_{1E}: The class/pass obtained has an effect on the median initial salary

H_{1F}: IT skills of graduates has an effect on the median initial salary

For the variables: waiting time and first salary, non-parametric tests (Mann-Whitney U test and Kruskal-Wallis test) were applied to test the median. The non-normality of the data and the less number of observations in several combinations (see Appendix for Table A to F) restricted the use of parametric tests.

Additional hypotheses were built to test the relationships among variables: waiting time for first job, initial salary, unemployment and future improvements requested by the graduates for the degree programmes.

H_{1G}: Unemployment depends on the medium of degree

H_{1H}: The class/pass obtained has an effect on the unemployment

H_{1I}: IT skills of graduates has an effect on the unemployment

H_{1J}: Requesting additional English courses depends on unemployment

H_{1K}: Requesting additional English courses depends on the medium of degree

H_{1L}: Requesting additional IT courses depends on unemployment

H_{1M}: Requesting an industrial training depends on the waiting time for the first job

H_{1N}: Those who have requested industrial training have low initial salary

Chi-squared test for the independence was applied for testing the hypotheses H_{1G} to H_{1L}. H_{1M} and H_{1N} were tested using Mann-Whitney U test.

5. RESULTS

Histograms were obtained for the initial salary and waiting time and they showed asymmetric patterns. Anderson Darling test was applied in order to further test the normality of data. The p-values were 0.005 and 0.006 for waiting time for the first job and the first salary respectively, indicating a large deviation from normal distribution. Non-overlapping mean and median values of two variables (Table 1) also justify the use of non parametric methods in the data analysis.

TABLE 1: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF MAJOR VARIABLES

Variable	Mean	Median
Waiting time for the first job in days	324.6	263.0
First salary in Rupees	12124	11500

Therefore, suitable non parametric tests were applied and the test results for each hypothesis are given in Table 2.

TABLE 2: MANN-WHITNEY AND KRUSKAL-WALLIS TEST RESULTS

Hypothesis	Test	Median	IQR	P-Value
H _{1A}	Mann-Whitney	English=186	English=260	0.020
		Sinhala=389	Sinhala=703	
H _{1B}	Kruskal-Wallis	Upper=309	Upper=611	0.730
		Lower=266	Lower=315	
		Pass=246	Pass=539	
H _{1C}	Mann-Whitney	Yes=205	Yes=315	0.072
		No=306	No=721	
H _{1D}	Mann-Whitney	English=11000	English=7161	0.982
		Sinhala=11500	Sinhala=7215	
H _{1E}	Kruskal-Wallis	Upper=15000	Upper=6360	0.084
		Lower=11250	Lower=6000	
		Pass=10000	Pass=7215	
H _{1F}	Mann-Whitney	Yes=10750	Yes=7125	0.369
		No=12500	No=6215	
H _{1M}	Mann-Whitney	Yes=141	Yes=259	0.044

		No=320	No=721	
H_{1N}	Mann-Whitney	Yes=10000	Yes=5070	0.018
		No=13995	No=5724	

The Chi-squared test applied to test the hypotheses H_{1G} to H_{1L} provided the results given in Table 3.

TABLE 3: CHI-SQUARED TEST RESULTS

Hypothesis	P-Value
H_{1G}	0.028
H_{1H}	0.575
H_{1I}	0.045
H_{1J}	0.168
H_{1K}	0.038
H_{1L}	0.253

Hypotheses: H_{1A} , H_{1C} and H_{1M} are significant at 10% level. It indicates that waiting time for the first job depends on medium of degree, IT skills and requesting industrial training. Significance of hypothesis H_{1E} indicates that initial salary of employed graduates depends on the class/pass they obtained. According to the H_{1N} graduates who had low initial salaries, have requested industrial training. Hypotheses H_{1G} and H_{1I} regarding unemployment are significant at 5% level. It implies that the medium of degree and IT skills of graduates are major factors affecting their employability. The p-value of H_{1K} reveals that, the need of additional IT courses has not been equally identified by English and Sinhala medium graduates.

6. CONCLUSION

Medium of degree and IT skills are the major factors affecting waiting time of the BA graduates for getting into the first job. The median waiting time of English medium graduates is about half of that of Sinhala medium graduates. Those who began their first job early have suggested that industrial training is important. Early employed graduates do not get much time for industrial exposure through additional professional courses or training programmes after completion of the degree. This might cause them to have some problems in adapting to a working environment with relevant capabilities. BA holders who get low initial salaries also request industrial training.

Graduates of the above categories particularly think that they could avoid these types of problems, if an industrial training is provided as a part of the degree. High performance (obtaining a class for the degree) of students achieved during their study time affects the level of salary they could demand when getting into a job (Table 2). The research strongly emphasizes the importance of proficiency in English language and IT for the employability of BA holders.

The research implications to the academics are: when developing new curriculums and practical schedules, they should mainly focus on improving English language and IT skills. It means that, unless curriculum developments of the Arts faculties do not deviate from their traditional approaches to some extent and do not introduce more innovative course modules, it is very hard for them to produce employable graduates who are demanded by the industry.

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APPENDIX

TABLE A

Medium	Waiting time for the first job (days)			
	0-100	100–300	300-500	500-1000
English	11	10	04	04
Sinhala	06	04	06	09

TABLE B

Class/Pass	Waiting time for the first job (days)			
	0-100	100-300	300-500	500-1000
2nd Upper	03	03	03	03
2nd Lower	04	05	04	03
Pass	10	06	03	07

TABLE C

IT Skills	Waiting time for the first job (days)			
	0-100	100-300	300-500	500-1000
Yes	08	09	04	04
No	09	05	06	09

TABLE D

Medium	Initial Salary (Rs.)			
	0-5000	5000-10000	10000-20000	Above 20000
English	01	10	16	05
Sinhala	00	07	20	00

TABLE E

Class/Pass	Initial Salary (Rs.)			
	0-5000	5000-10000	10000-20000	Above 20000
2nd Upper	00	01	10	02
2nd Lower	01	06	09	00
Pass	00	10	16	03

TABLE F

IT Skills	Initial Salary (Rs.)			
	0-5000	5000-10000	10000-20000	Above 20000
Yes	00	10	13	03
No	01	07	23	02

TABLE G

Medium	Employment	
	Employed	Not employed
English	32	8
Sinhala	26	19

TABLE H

Class/Pass	Employment	
	Employed	Not employed
2nd Upper	12	3
2nd Lower	15	8
Pass	30	15

TABLE I

IT Skills	Employment	
	Employed	Not employed
Yes	26	6
No	32	21

TABLE J

Need more English	Employment	
	Employed	Not employed
Yes	22	09
No	36	18

TABLE K

Need more English	Medium	
	English	Sinhala
Yes	10	21
No	30	24

TABLE L

Need more IT Skills	Employment	
	Employed	Not employed
Yes	20	06
No	38	21

TABLE M

Need industrial training	Waiting time for the first job (days)			
	0-100	100-300	300-500	500-1000
Yes	09	08	04	02
No	08	06	06	11

TABLE N

Need industrial training	Initial Salary (Rs.)			
	0-5000	5000-10000	10000-20000	Above 20000
Yes	01	09	13	02
No	00	08	23	03