

6.15 Skill Development among University Undergraduates: Why it is necessary and what is so far achieved?

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ABSTRACT

Unemployment rate in Sri Lanka compared to the other countries in the region has been the highest during the last few decades. This is more severe among the educated youths, especially among graduates. Mismatch hypothesis has been emphasized as a major reason for appearing such a high level of unemployment since it was first identified by the ILO team came to Sri Lanka in 1971. Mismatch or the skills mismatch hypothesis indicates that the types of work which educated youths are willing and able to do, do not match the pattern of opportunities that are available (ILO, 1971). This is further substantiated by the World Bank Economist, Martin Rama (1994) stating that although the Sri Lankan labour force may be highly educated but not particularly skilled. The ILO team primarily attributed this mismatch to the educational structure of the labour force and the ‘formidable rate of educational expansion’, drawing the attention to the quality and content of the education as well. Thus, this hypothesis highlights that skills of educated youths particularly our graduates are not matched, especially to the private sector employers’ requirements under a policy environment of recognizing the private sector as the engine for growth.

In this setting, the study defines what ‘skills’ are. There are two types of skills, namely ‘hard’ skills and ‘soft’ skills. Technical know how can be considered as a hard skill. Commonsense, an analytical and innovative mind, a global outlook, leadership, and language abilities and communication abilities are the examples for soft skills which are now highly sought after. Then, we can see how far undergraduates have these features. Certain positive attributes are identified among the university students. On the other hand, the employers have identified certain negative features. They are the lack of self confidence, lack of decisiveness, avoiding risk taking, not have adversity, insufficiency in communication skills, and having very mild competitive values (Mendis, 2004).

Having realized the obligation of improving skills among graduates by the university authorities this study, mainly based on secondary data, searched for evidence to determine whether the university

authorities have made a substantial effort to make their study programmes more appropriate. System of the university education prior to mid 1990s was teacher centered, and examinations were held at the end of the year. Continuous assessment method was not followed, and students did not have opportunities to improve their skills and expose themselves to outside business world. Dassanyake and Karunaratna (1996) reading a paper emphasized at a workshop organized by the UGC on 'Undergraduate Teaching Methodologies' that there was a great need for a change in the existing methods of teaching, particularly for Commerce and Management undergraduates proposing to introduce a number of steps. Among them the following recommendations were significant: arranging staff development programmes for lecturers; adopting continuous evaluation methods with the introduction of course unit systems; providing opportunities for students to evaluate their lecturers and making collaborations with the industry.

Evidence found by this study shows that within a period less than a decade from making these recommendations they have been successfully put into practice by almost all the faculties in the university system. These effort have been further augmented by the World Bank funded IRQE project first phase of which has now been completed providing a competitive grant worth of Rs.4800 million to a large number of academic departments, and now, this project is about to implement its second phase from 2010. The Quality Assurance and Accreditation Council (QAAC) under the University Grants Commission as a part of the IRQUE project also has been set up with the objective of ensuring study programmes' quality and appropriateness. So far, 82 % of subject reviews under the supervision of QAAC have been completed. Thus, study concludes that university authorities have fully recognized the importance of inculcating skills among undergraduates and has taken a number of effective steps with a considerable degree of success of implementing them.

Key words: skills development, unemployment, mismatch hypothesis, system of university education and quality assurance.