

Private sector prospect on the adequacy of art graduates employability in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Enhancing the Employability skills of Arts graduates is considered as a means of overcoming the problem of unemployment among the Sri Lankan university community. The majority of the products of the universities today are recorded as Arts graduates and the employability rate of them is considered low. As a rising sector and a main performer of the labor market, today, the private sector is playing its role vastly through its contribution to the labor market demands. In this scenario, the private sector prefers graduates who are committed to work, able with effective communication, having a smart personality and are well-employable.

The study was aimed to examine the problem of the adequacy of state university, internal Arts graduates employability in order to fulfil private sector job requirements via private sector employers prospects, considering their satisfaction level for employability assets towards Arts graduates. This was conducted to identify the private sector prospect towards Arts graduates employability based on their knowledge and skills acquired by the degree program. The study was quantitative in nature and used descriptive statistics, cross – tabulation for the data analysis. The sample was selected from Colombo district private companies.

A concise conclusion of findings of the study reveals that, even though the private sector shows a positive response towards Arts graduates" employability, it is not up to the standards expected by the private sector. Especially, the adequate level of Arts graduates language skills, computer skills, and leadership skills, planning skills, independency and relevancy of knowledge required by employers are inadequate. Consequently, this inadequacy of employability will lead to raise the unemployment rate among the Arts graduates in the premier part of the labor market, the private sector.

Key words: *Arts Graduates, Employability skills, Private sector prospect, Unemployment*

Introduction

Contemporary job market is dynamic. Employers in the job market except non-profit motivating companies, chasing after their ultimate objective “profit”. In this scenario they are tempted to hire the best out of the best employees for the success of their company thereby to enhance company performance against their competitors. Arts graduates from state universities should compete with professional qualification holders as well as foreign and state degree holders in a job market where employers prefer to recruit the most qualified, most employable employees who are able to achieve future at present. Therefore there is a need to match the skills of university arts graduates with the needs of the industry if they are to be successful in the job market. Hence, there is an urgent need of identifying the employers’ prospects on the knowledge, skills and attributes of potentially employable graduates and their opinion regarding the comparability of arts graduates with other graduates.

What is Employability?

Employment and employability is not the same thing and should be differentiated (Lee, 2002). Being employed means having a job, being employable means having the qualities needed to maintain employment and progress in the workplace. In general, employability is defined as a set of achievements, understanding and personal attributes that make an individual more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefit themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy”. University of Exeter defined employability as; “the establishment of clear mechanisms by which students can develop their abilities to use and deploy a wide range of skills and opportunities to enhance their own academic learning and enable them to become more employable” (Weligamage 2009). According to the research conducted by Hillage and Pollard 1998 in UK, “Employability is about being capable of getting and keeping fulfilling work. More comprehensively employability is the capability to move self-sufficiently within the labor market to realize potential through sustainable employment”. They propose that employability consists of four main elements. The first of these, a person’s “Employability Assets”, consists of their knowledge, skills and attitudes. The second, “Deployment”, includes career management skills, including job search skills. Thirdly, “Presentation” is concerned with “job getting skills”, for example CV writing, work experience and interview techniques. Finally, Hillage and Pollard also make the important point that for a person to be able to make the most of their “Employability Assets”, a lot

depends on their personal circumstances (for example, family responsibilities) and external factors (for example the current level of opportunity within the labor market). According to Morley (2001), employability is not just about students making deposits in a bank of skills. The employability model illustrated by Lorraine Dacre Pool and Peter Sewell (in 2007) reflects an assertion that each component is absolutely essential and one missing element will considerably reduce a graduate's employability. The reminder "Career EDGE" is used as an aid to remember the five components on the lower tier of the model.

What do "Employability Skills" Mean?

Enhancing employability skills of the graduates' is not a new topic and policy makers are still making plans to increase graduates' skills to meet the need of the current workforce. Higher education institutions are one of the key players in enhancing employability and their responsibility to identify how they can enhance skills of their future employees. Many studies have been published in the past decade on the 'skills' required by employers of graduates and these studies assume that 'skills' are the answer, even though more open-ended research into the perceived mismatches between the supply of higher education graduates and the demands of employers gives higher education a more challenging job to do (Little 2003). With its significance characteristics to be employable, employability skills have been discussed in many reports relates to employability and employment. The document of "Employers' perceptions of the employability skills of new graduates" compiled by the University of Glasgow SCRE Centre and Edge Foundation 2011 define employability skills as "Positive attitude, Self-management, Team working, Business and customer awareness, Problem solving, Communication and literacy, Application of numeracy and Application of information technology". Also they have placed an emphasis on graduates possessing a positive attitude as a key factor underpinning their employability, whether the individual has "a 'can-do' approach, a readiness to take part and contribute, openness to new ideas and a drive to make these happen". They note that employers value graduates who can demonstrate an entrepreneurial and innovative approach, and creative thinking which brings fresh perspectives and challenges assumptions.

University of Sydney believes that graduates should be more employable, more able to cope with change and more developed as people (Siengthai .S, Weligamage .S 2009). In specific terms, graduates of any faculty, board of study or college of the university should have knowledge skills, thinking skills, personal skills, personal attributes and practical skills. They have mentioned a

specific list of requirements needed to fulfill the above skills and those are “Knowledge Skills, Thinking Skills, Personal Skills, Personal Attributes and Practical Skills”. Nevertheless employers want graduates with relevant subject specific skills, knowledge and understanding. But in addition to this, they are looking for well-developed generic skills in a number of areas.

Employers’ Perspectives and Expectations toward Graduates Employability Skills

An employers’ perspective defines employability skills or skills to be employed as “skills required not only to gain employment, but also to progress within an enterprise so as to achieve one’s potential and contribute successfully to enterprise strategic directions” (Weligamage 2009). Private sector employers value the degree knowledge of graduates but they also look for employability skills such as personal skills, thinking skills, fluency in international languages and positive work attitude. A recent study, based on a cross-sectional survey of private sector senior executives from seven major sectors of the economy (including banking, Insurance, garment) has revealed that, in addition to imparting subject knowledge, developing core skills and personality attributes was very important at the university level. The personality attributes mostly cited by the respondents include communication skills, team orientation, trainability, presentation skills, positive attitudes, accountability, ambition, discipline and civics. Also to the survey conducted by the Chamber of Commerce in Sri Lanka in 1999 has mentioned that the “ability for effective communication skills along with English, ability of interpersonal relationships, ability of leading a team and getting the results within a short time, ability of prioritization of work; initiation of work and intention of its development, open, proactive and pragmatic mind, computer literacy, ability of logical and rational thinking, general knowledge and personal hygiene and office and social etiquette as the expected attributes and qualities by the private sector employers from the graduates in addition to their academic qualifications. In world scenario, to identify employer requirement most of the universities in the world regularly conduct employers’ needs surveys (Weligamage 2009). Employers normally give their comments on the skills they are looking for in new employees. A study conducted by the Council for Industry and Higher Education in the United Kingdom (UK) in 2008 found that employers rate communication skills, team work, integrity and intellectual ability over literacy and numeracy. According to the “Pedagogy for Employability Group” (2004), they have provided a list derived from research carried out over the last 25 years and suggested that employers expect generic skills to have been developed in graduates and it included, creativity, flexibility, willingness to learn, working in

a team, good oral communication, numeracy, time management and so on (Pool and Sewell 2007). Most of the developed country universities had taken pioneer attempt to discover what employers really look from their workers. Graduate skills and attributes that are valued by employers in order to recruit the best employees for their companies. According to the scoping interviews with employer and higher education institute (HEI) organizations found that there are characteristics, skills and knowledge and intellectual capability elements that are required for specific roles (Lowden, Hall, Elliot and Lewin 2011). In addition to these skills, they also highlighted the need for particular attitudes and outlooks including motivation, tenacity, and commitment.

Methodology

As the research aims to identify the “Private Sector Prospect for the Employability Level of Arts Graduates”, by finding an unbiased answer to the problem, well reputed private companies and most affected persons for the problem was selected from the formal sector private companies situated in Colombo district. The sample of the study was selected from the formal sector private companies (Registered under the *Companies Act, No. 07 of 2007*) situated in Colombo district, Western province, Sri Lanka. The sample of employers (private companies) included 45 employers representing private companies. It consisted of formal sector private companies employers who are responsible for the recruitment process in their companies. The study only selected executives / upper level officers who are directly involved in the recruitment process. The sample of companies covered by major sections in the formal private sector as Banking and Finance, Apparel, Food and Beverage and Other (Ceramic Products, Gas, Consumer Products, Telecommunication and Agriculture Chemicals). Companies were selected based on the random and convenience sampling method in order to represent four of the above mentioned categories.

This study used two main research instruments as structured questionnaires and interviews. Interviews were used as an alternative research instrument to identify employers’ personal prospects which was unable to gain by filling questionnaires. Structured questionnaires used as a main research instrument to identify their prospect on employability variables as well as graduate unemployment problem. Questionnaires were developed based on the knowledge gained from past studies conducted by international and local researches, institutes and applied only the most suitable variables for the Sri Lankan context. When preparing the questions, the study was careful of the level of understanding and the convenience of answering of the respondents.

The questionnaires included short answer questions and questions on the likert's scale system. This was basically a qualitative research in descriptive format that uses relatively less complex and common statistical tools such as descriptive statistics for the data analysis. The software package used for this study was SPSS 19.0 version which is a common statistical package widely used for data analysis purposes in research.

Analysis

The study was analyzed under three main components of employability; according to the “Hillage and Pollard model of “key to employability in 1998”; “Knowledge, Skills and Attributes” which includes in “Employability Assets” as a main component of Employability.

Knowledge

Question on the knowledge of Arts graduates basically focused on seven factors and these were selected from the previous researches on employability. Table 1.0 shows the responses of all 45 employers according to each factor.

Table 1.0: Knowledge

	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation
1). Relevancy with Job Field	2.33	2.00	.477
2). Changing with Modern Requirements	2.40	2.00	.654
3). Accuracy	3.11	3.00	.438
4). Applicability	2.67	3.00	.522
5). Literacy	3.02	3.00	.452
6). Numeracy	2.40	2.00	.495
7). Information Technology (IT) and IQ	2.20	2.00	.661

1=Very Bad 2=Not Enough 3=Good 4=Very Good

Source; Survey 2012

As per the table 1.0 shows, employers have responded 4 out of seven factors emphasize the goodness of knowledge as, ‘not enough’. As the mean values interprets the factors, “Relevancy with the job field, Changing with modern requirements, Numeracy and IT and IQ” are more close to ‘not enough’ level by ranking its value in between 2.20 to 2.40. The remaining three elements of

“Accuracy, Applicability and Literacy” are valued as ‘good’ by its means values (=3.11, 2.67, 3.02).

Skills

Respondents expressed their level of agreements of Arts graduates skills based on their long term experiences of recruitment and working with graduate employees. For the purpose of recognize the private sector prospect for Arts graduates skills, the study is designed to prepare the questionnaire including the most commonly considered skills from employers. According to the below table 1.1, mean, median and standard deviation values for employers responses are fluctuated in between 2.33 and 3.22.

Table 1.1: Skills

Skills	Values		
	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation
1).Leadership	2.49	2.00	.549
2).Planning and Decision Making	2.47	2.00	.548
3).Problem Solving	2.56	3.00	.503
4).Fluency in Communication in English	2.40	2.00	.495
5).Team Working	3.22	3.00	.420
6).Risk Handling	2.33	2.00	.564
7).Creativity	3.22	3.00	.560

1=Very Bad 2=Not Enough 3=Good 4=Very Good

Source; Survey 2012

As the mean values in table 1.1 shows, employers level of agreement for Arts graduates skills like leadership, decision making, risk handling and communication in English are ranked at the ‘not enough’ level. But skills as problem solving, team working and creativity have been ranked above 2.5 of mean values (more than 2.5=3.0=good). The mean value of Arts graduates creativity is valued as 3.22, this is the highest valued mean value among all other skills.

Table 1.2: Skills

Skills	Very Bad	Not Enough	Good	Very Good	Total
1).Leadership	-	24	20	01	45
2).Planning and Decision Making	-	25	19	01	45
3).Problem Solving	-	20	25	-	45
4).Fluency in Communication in English	-	27	18	-	45
5).Team Working	-	35	10	-	45
6).Risk Handling	02	26	17	-	45
7).Creativity	-	03	29	13	45

Source; Survey 2012

Considering the frequencies in table 1.2, the most common feature of each of these is, more than 24 employers out of 45 employers have placed their dissatisfaction (not adequate) on these skills. Nevertheless, most of employers' level of agreement for the skills such as problem solving, team working and creativity are rated at favorable level. As per the table 1.2, mean values for each of these skills have seen at 'good' level. Especially employers have greatly appreciated Arts graduates' creativity skills and team working

Attributes

For the purpose of examine employers' view on Arts graduates "Employability Assets", the study considered a few of the main attributes in order to identify employers level of opinion or agreement. Table 1.3, shows the calculated mean values, median values and standard deviation values for the given elements under 'Attributes' component and Table 1.4 shows the frequencies for each level of agreement.

Table 1.3: Attributes

Attributes	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation
Independency	2.42	2.00	.499
Ethnic Behavior	3.04	3.00	.298
Discipline	3.16	3.00	.562
Personality	2.40	2.00	.495
Loyalty	3.22	3.00	.420

1=Very Bad 2=Not Enough 3=Good 4=Very Good

Table 1.4: Attributes

Attributes	Very Bad	Not Enough	Good	Very Good	Total
Independency	-	26	19	-	45
Ethnic Behavior	-	01	41	03	45
Discipline	01	01	33	10	45
Personality	-	27	18	-	45
Loyalty	-	-	35	10	45

Source; Survey 2012

As per the table 1.3, calculated mean values, median values and standard deviation values shows 3 attributes out of all 5 attributes are closer to value 3 which interprets 'good'. Ranked as 'good' attributes can named as 'ethnic behavior, discipline and loyalty' of Arts graduates at working place and in general. Gaining 2.42 and 2.40 mean values for employers' responses, 'independence and personality' of Arts graduates have ranked at 'not enough' level.

The summarized response for 45 employers' responses on Arts graduates' attributes is calculated as an average of mean values. The calculated mean value is more close to the response level 'good' (Mean Value=2.84). According to the mean value, the study is recognized, employers responses on Arts graduates 'attitudes' as an employability asset is at a 'good' rate. Table 1.5 shows a concise picture of 'good' and 'not enough' factors as employers responded.

Table 1.5: Employers Prospect for Employability Assets

Good	Mean Value	Not Enough	Mean Value
Accuracy – Knowledge	3.11	Relevancy – Knowledge	2.33
Applicability – Knowledge	2.67	Changing with modern requirement – Knowledge	2.40
Literacy – Knowledge	3.02	Numeracy – Knowledge	2.40
		IT and IQ – Knowledge	2.20
Problem Solving – Skill	2.56	Leadership – Skill	2.49
Team Working – Skill	3.22	Planning and D.M – Skill	2.47
Creativity – Skill	3.22	Eng. Communication – Skill	2.40

		Risk Handling – Skill	2.33
Ethnic Behavior-Attribute	3.04	Independency – Attribute	2.42
Discipline – Attribute	3.16	Personality – Attribute	2.40
Loyalty – Attribute	3.22		

1=Very Bad 2=Not Enough 3=Good 4=Very Good

Source; Survey 2012

As per the table 1.5 employers prospect for 04 factors under ‘Knowledge’ asset, 04 factors under ‘Skill’ asset and 02 factors under ‘Attribute’ asset are below the average of good and has ranked as ‘not enough’ to fulfill employability as private sector prospect. Nevertheless employers further comments for each asset (knowledge, skills and attributes) convinced that most rejected (not enough) factors as most required. It illustrates the majority of the private sector employers give their first priority to the relevancy of the knowledge, numeracy, computer skills, leadership skills, effective communication in English, personality, team working, and independency. The survey conducted by the Chamber of commerce in Sri Lanka in 1999 has also mentioned that, ability of effective communication skills along with English, leadership and team working skills, independency, computer literacy, general knowledge and personal hygiene are the skills expected by the private sector employers. As the employers response for all these skills except ‘team working’ have ranked at a ‘not enough’ level in the study (table 1.5). According to the Chamber of commerce, these are the highly expected skills as good measures of employability by the private sector. Furthermore, the study “Graduate Employability” by Will Archer and Jess Davison in London has ranked, communication skills, computer skills, numeracy a may Top 10 most important skills and capabilities when recruiting new graduates’. Likewise, many researches, studies have revealed that communication skills especially along with English, computer skills, personality, leadership skills, team working, decision making skills as most important to be employable in the competitive job field. But as per the study shows these skills have ranked at not enough level by majority of employers. Nevertheless, according to the calculated average of mean values for each asset, the average was more close to value 3.0 (3.0=good) that has interpreted a positive prospect of private sector employers towards Arts graduates employability assets in Sri Lanka.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis, the study presents a concise conclusion and recommendations for consideration. The study analyzed employability assets of Arts graduates from employers' view in respect to employers' responses for 19 factors under knowledge, skills and attributes used to assess the level of Arts graduates employability. The ultimate outcome of the study expressed a favorable value for Arts graduates' employability. Even though, the common assessment of employers towards employability (knowledge, skills, attributes) level of Arts graduates was at a favorable (good) manner, it can clearly identify that there is no exact guarantee for them to be recruited. Though the average value for employability assets was good, further comments of employers revealed that Arts graduates employability is not enough for the most important and expected factors by the private sector such as, language skills, personality, leadership, risk handling skills, independency and relevancy. Finally it can be concluded that there is potential in private sector but the existing employability level of Arts graduates is not that much strength to fulfill private sector job requirements adequately. Hence the Arts degree holders or simply Arts graduates should improve the essential knowledge, skills and attributes, especially English language proficiency, IT skills, leadership and personality in order to create more actual potential in job market, to be more employable compared to others and to remove the label 'unemployed Arts graduates' from the entire society.

Limitation of the Study

- This study considers the sample only from the Western province private companies and this may be a limitation in order to the generalization of the conclusion of the study.
- There is an inability of capture the entire private sector prospect by studying only a few companies in the sector.
- The accuracy of primary data, especially some information, can depend on personal attitudes, favors and their background.
- The study used only the most common factors to assess the employability of Arts graduates and some factors have to be omitted.

- This study examines only from the market prospect for identify the employability of Arts graduates (One sided discussion)

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