

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

# INVESTIGATING THE UNEMPLOYMENT OF UNDERGRADUATES IN THE EASTERN PROVINCE, SRI LANKA: FACTORS AND REMEDIES

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### Abstract

The aim of this study was to investigate the status of unemployability of undergraduates in the Eastern Province, Sri Lanka. This study was a descriptive survey research and both qualitative and quantitative methods were utilized in data collection. In this study, 150 unemployed undergraduates in the Eastern Province were randomly selected as sample population. The research instrument of this study was a focus interview. Hence, the findings of the participants' demographical information show that majority of the participants' basic degree was Bachelor of Arts (BA). Moreover, as per the UGC graduates output report and graduates summary report of the Eastern Provincial Secretariat, many BA graduates has been mostly unemployed than other undergraduates in the Eastern Province. The unemployment issue can be overcome when the undergraduates are produced according to the demands and requirements of the employment market and bring the change in the university curriculum.

**Keywords:** Undergraduates, unemployment, University Grants Commission

## 1. Introduction

The main objective of higher education is to educate and train students towards gaining careers in a country. Perera (2006 & 2008) state that the major objective of promoting children for higher education in most of Sri Lankan families is to ensure their employability. With regard to higher education, university education seems significant in producing degree holders in various fields for the nation.

Moreover, Shetty (2010) claims that higher education has long been recognized as a major contributing factor to the social, cultural and intellectual life of society by improving the quality of human life. Likewise, Ballantine (1997) describes that universities are the communities with overall academic programs, centralized physical settings, a form of governance and a range of services. In Sri Lanka, there are 14 state universities and number non-state universities and foreign universities degree awarding study centres which produce number of undergraduate and postgraduate students every year. According to the Graduate Output 2019 report of the University Grants Commission (UGC), 24, 890 internal and external bachelor degree holders had graduated in various fields of study from the state universities and higher educational institutions in Sri Lanka in 2019. Likewise,

non-state and foreign universities/institutions had produced a large number of bachelor degree holders in 2019. On the other hand, the unemployed graduates are increasing every year, particularly in the Eastern Province. Ariyawansa (2008) points out that many of the graduates having passed out obtain a certificate, which does not help enough them to find suitable employments. As he pointed out above, there are huge number of graduates who graduated in the fields like Arts, Commerce, Management and Science in the Eastern Province.

However, they are unable to find a job according to their qualifications. The major reason seems that they do not possess sufficient knowledge, skill and language proficiency required in the labour market. As a result, they rely on government teaching and other government posts and the unemployment has been higher in Sri Lanka, especially in the Eastern Province. Further, Singam (2017) conducted a study to answer the research question as to why the Faculties of Sri Lankan State universities continue to produce graduates who find it hard to obtain jobs in the employment market. Therefore, to investigate this problem and suggest necessary recommendations to overcome the issue of unemployment in Sri Lanka, this study was carried out considering the undergraduates in the Eastern Province. This study will fill the gap of other previous studies.

### *1.1 Problem Statement*

Every year state non-state and foreign universities in Sri Lanka produce a number of undergraduates in various field of study. However, job opportunities are not provided to all the degree holders in Sri Lanka. As a result, the unemployment rate increases every year. Most importantly, as concerning the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka, it is noteworthy that the undergraduates who graduated in 2013 were employed only in 2020 as graduate trainee. It is obvious that they had been unemployed undergraduate degree holders for over 7 years. When investigating the factors behind the unemployment, most of them graduated in study of Bachelor of Arts (BA) field. These undergraduates are unable to fill the demand and requirement of the labour market since most of the courses in Arts field are offered in Tamil medium. They encounter challenges in finding out job opportunities in private sector.

### *1.2 Objectives of the Research*

1. To investigate the status of employability for undergraduates in the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka
2. To explore the reasons behind the unemployability of undergraduates in the Eastern Province

## **2. Literature Review**

Unemployment in a country is one of the significant problems which affect the economy, culture and socio-economic status of individuals of a country. Therefore, several research studies have been locally and internationally conducted about the unemployment. As reviewing previous studies, in a study related to the current study, Nazir et al (2009) point out that the unemployment negatively affects the socio-economic status of family in Faisalabad, Pakistan. They further assert that it leads to poor mental health, increase of corruption and drug addiction.

Likewise, this is a major issue in Sri Lanka. There are number studies which had been carried out in Sri Lanka about the unemployment, in particular, about the unemployment of graduates in Sri Lanka. Phillip & Aruppillai (2014) describes the types of unemployment as structural employment, frictional unemployment, seasonal unemployment and cyclical unemployment. These types of unemployment affect the graduates. The students who are enrolled for universities start their higher studies with the aim of getting a job and their parents rely on them.

However, after completing their bachelor degree, they cannot find unemployment. Most of the graduates have been searching for a job for more than three years. Perera (2008) & Perera (2005) state that the major objective of promoting children for higher education in most of Sri Lankan families is to ensure their employability. Similarly, Ariyawansa (2008) states that almost all Sri Lankan families

are having greater aspiration of providing university education for their children as a secured path of higher employability. He further emphasizes that generally, graduates are considered as one of the most significant human capitals of a country. Based on their statements, with regard to giving job opportunities, bachelor degree holders should be considered and job opportunities should be offered immediately after their graduation.

Ariyawansa (2008) further asserts that some graduates have to be engaged in irrelevant jobs mostly under low salaries while some of them have to be unemployed and waiting for a long time mostly until the government provides opportunities due to the mismatch of curriculum of demands and requirements of the job market. The universities do not produce degree holders according to the demands and expectations of the labour market.

### 3. Methodology

This study was a descriptive survey research. In this study, random sampling technique was used to select the sample population. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used. The data collection method was qualitative and the data presentation method was quantitative. In this study, 150 unemployed graduates in the Eastern Province were randomly selected as sample population for primary data collection.

Further, a focus interview was used as primary data collection tool of this study. The interview consisted of 12 close-ended and open-ended questions that focused on participants' demographic information and the factors behind the unemployability of undergraduates in the Eastern Province. Moreover, the secondary data instruments were graduates output report of the UGC and total registered graduates' summary report of the Personal and Training Unit of the Provincial Secretariat, Eastern Province.

As for the primary data collection, the interview was conducted in-person and through telephone conversation. Before conducting the interview, the participants were instructed regarding the purpose of collecting opinions among the participants. Consequently, the interview was conducted. Likewise, as for the secondary data collection, the graduate output report was collected from the Provincial Secretariat, Eastern Province and the graduates' summary report was collected from the UGC.

In this study, quantitative data analysis method was applied for data analysis and presentation. Both primary and secondary data were analyzed using statistics and the analyzed data were presented through table and graph.

### 4. Results and Discussion

This section presents the results and findings of the study.

#### 4.1 The UGC Graduate Output Report

The following table presents the Total Graduate (Bachelor Degree) Output – 2019 of UGC, Sri Lanka.

As discussing the results of Graduate Output – 2019 of UGC, Sri Lanka, majority of the unemployed graduates are BA holders in the Eastern Province. The reason behind the unemployability of BA graduates is that they do not have access to find out jobs in private sectors since most of them do not possess the requirement of private sectors. As a result, they rely on government posts, but the issue is that the government cannot provide appointments to all the undergraduates due non-availability of cadres in the Eastern Province.

Therefore, according to the undergraduates' report of the Personal and Training Unit of the Provincial Secretariat, Eastern Province, there were 399 BA degree holders in 2019. Due to limited cadres are allotted by the Public Service Commission, Eastern Province for teaching and other

Table 1. Table 1 Source: Total Graduate Output – 2019 of UGC, Sri Lanka

Faculty/Academic Programme	Female	Total
Arts	7,603	9,380
Education	171	185
Management & Commerce	3,620	5,445
Law	472	767
Medicine	747	1,188
Dental Science	45	87
Vet. Science	40	54
Agriculture	627	920
Engineering	326	1,026
Architecture	97	242
Computer Science	575	1,210
Allied Health Sciences	595	745
Science	2,081	3,393
Indigenous Medicine	193	248
Total	17,192	24,890

appointments, all the BA graduates are not given appointments. Therefore, the unemployment rate is higher when compared to other provinces in Sri Lanka.

Further, According to Sri Lanka Labour Force Survey, Department of Census and Statistics, the unemployment rate in the Eastern Province was 15.8% in 2018. The unemployment rate includes the undergraduates too. It is obvious that most of the degree programmes are offered in Tamil medium. As because of the lower English language proficiency, IT literacy, soft skills and leadership qualities, they are not given satisfactory job opportunities in private sectors in the Eastern Province.

#### 4.2 Total Registered Graduate Details Summary

This section presents the findings of the total registered graduate details summary of Personal and Training Unit of Provincial Secretariat, Eastern Province. Hence, the results of the findings show that as per 2019, there were 15 graduates in Agriculture, 13 graduates in Applied Science, 399 graduates in Arts, 28 graduates in Biological Science, 17 graduates in Business Administration, 85 graduates in Commerce, 52 graduates in Computer, 6 graduates in Economics, 2 graduates in education, 18 graduates in Engineering, 101 graduates in Fine arts, 11 graduates in Human Resource Management, 3 graduates in Law, 35 graduates in Management and 25 graduates in Physical science in the Eastern Province.

Based on the results of the graduates' details summary, it is obvious that most of the graduates whose field of study is Arts, Fine Arts, Biological Science or Physical science have been unemployed for long time since they are unable to find a job in private sector. Mismatch of graduates' qualification and requirement of job market is the primary reason for unemployability in private sector.

Singam (2017) concludes his study on graduates' unemployment in Sri Lanka that there is a mismatch between the attributes of graduates and need of quality and skills in the workplace. Singam (2017) further concludes that most of the studies have identified that communication; interpersonal skills, ethics and teamwork are competency gaps which exist among the graduates that finally lead to the results of unemployment. Thus, It has been a long problem which needs to be solved. The mismatch of educational curriculum and the demand and requirement of employment market seems the key factors for unemployment in Sri Lanka.

### 4.3 Results and Discussion of the Interview

The following graph presents participants' field of study in which they obtained their first degree.

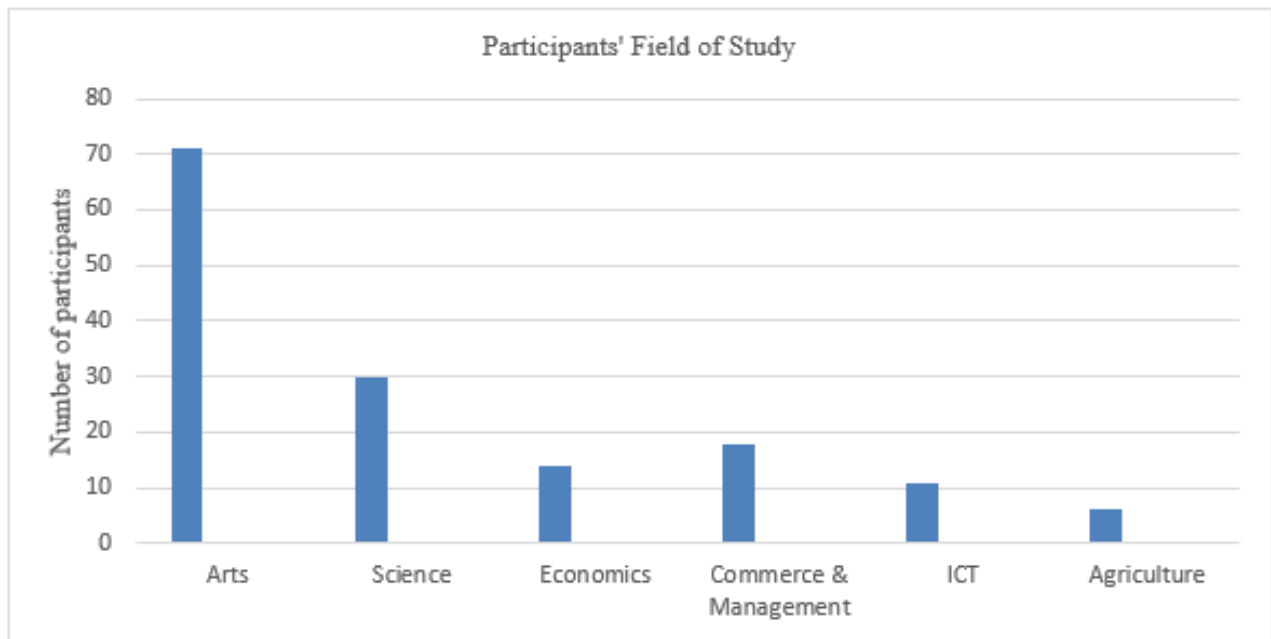


Figure 1. (Participants' Field of Study)

As discussing participants' field of study, majority of the participants had graduated in Arts and Science field. When the unemployed graduates in the Eastern province are investigated, those who graduate in Arts and Science are struggling to find job opportunities. It was revealed in the findings of the interview that a large number of undergraduates possess lower language proficiency and 78% of the participants prefer government job because they do not have the sufficient qualifications required by private companies. In Colombo, there are a huge number of job opportunities. However, since the undergraduates of Arts and Science (Biological and Physical Science) do not possess the qualification the labour market require, they are unable to apply for jobs in private sector. As a result, they rely on government posts.

However, those who graduate in Management studies, ICT, food Technology, Agriculture and Human Resource Management (HRM) do not rely on government jobs and they find job opportunities in private sector. According to the findings, just 11 ICT graduates and 6 Agriculture graduates are unemployed. Therefore, the findings of both primary and secondary data analysis clearly show that the undergraduates do not have the knowledge, skills and language proficiency required by labour market and a large amount of BA degree holders are produced internally and externally every year. In particular, BA degree holders are high in the Eastern Province. As a result, the unemployment rate is high in the Eastern Province.

## 5. Conclusions

This study can be concluded based results of the study that due to the increase of undergraduates in the Eastern Province, the unemployment of undergraduates seems to be higher. In particular, majority of the BA degree holders are mostly unemployed than other undergraduates since they do not possess sufficient knowledge and skills required by labour market to find out job opportunities in private sector.

Further, it is concluded based on participants' opinion survey that majority of the undergraduates were Arts degree holders, and the graduates who completed their course of study in Arts and Culture field rely on government posts such as teaching, Development Officer, for they are unable to find job

opportunities in private sectors. The major factors behind the unemployability of undergraduates includes: production of vast number of BA degree holders by UGC recognized foreign universities; lower English language proficiency of the graduates.

## 6. Recommendations

The following suggestions are recommended to overcome the issue of unemployment in the Eastern Province. The suggestions are as follow:

1. Changes should be brought in both school and university curriculum, and students should be educated and trained according to the demand and requirements of the labour market.
2. Bachelor of Arts (BA) programme should be offered only for internal undergraduates at state universities in Sri Lanka.
3. Foreign universities and non-state universities in Sri Lanka should function under the direct purview and monitoring of the University Grants Commission (UGC), and limited number of degree holders should be produced every year.
4. The curriculum for both foreign universities and non-state universities should be designed by the UGC and the assessments and examinations should be conducted under the monitoring of UGC.
5. The English as a Second Language curriculum of the Faculty of Arts or Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of state universities in Sri Lanka should be based on reaching sufficient English Language proficiency when they graduate from the respective university.
6. State-owned factories and companies should be established in order to provide job opportunities for bachelor degree holders.
7. Undergraduates who complete their academic programme with first class Honours should be considered and they should be permanently recruited to a suitable post relevant to their field of study immediately after the graduation, because to complete their first degree with class, they work hard and dedicate their entire time compared to average performing students. Despite these, they are also pushed into prolonged waiting for employment opportunities as if other undergraduates, and their hard work and dedication become meaningless.
8. The post of Management Assistant (MA) should be given to National Diploma holders and Higher National Diploma (HND) holders. As a result, the unemployment of diploma and HND holders in Sri Lanka can be reduced and this step will give a motivation to the Advanced Level (A/L) qualified students to continue their higher studies.

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