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IMPORTANCE OF SOFT SKILLS IN IMPROVING EMPLOYABILITY OF GRADUATES OF NATIONAL UNIVERSITIES IN SRI LANKA – A LITERATURE SEARCH

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the existing literature on soft skills with special emphasis on the Sri Lankan context. Literature is concentrated on identifying soft skills that enhance employability, identifying ways to improve soft skills and the perception of soft skill requirements by the employer and graduate / faculty. Existing literature suggests that the most important soft skill expected of a graduate is communication skills, while, internships, project based learning, soft skills programs and teaching methods are identified as modes to enhance soft skills. Further there is a discrepancy in the perceptions of the employers / students and faculty regarding the specific soft skill requirements of graduate.

KEY WORDS: Employability, Soft skills, Internships, project based learning

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INTRODUCTION

The Business Dictionary defines soft skills as "Communicating, conflict management, human relations, making presentations, negotiating, team building, and other such ability, defined in terms of expected outcomes and not as a specific method or technique such as statistical analysis".

Universities and higher education institutions are exploring ways of increasing the employability of their graduates. Employers expect something more than the theoretical knowledge and work related skills in graduates. Acquiring soft skills competencies becomes increasingly important and relevant for those who are seeking employment. Several studies are being done on identifying required soft skills of graduates, how to develop soft skills in graduates and perceptions of employers regarding soft skill requirements of prospective employees.

DISCUSSION

Types of Soft Skills:-

Many researchers have identified several soft skills expected of a prospective graduate. Crawford J. P., Fink S., Dalton W. R., & Flietz L. (2011) found that communication skills, decision making/problem solving skills, self management skills, teamwork skills, professionalism skills, experience and leadership skills are the soft skill clusters in this study. Polziehn, R. (2011) found that most important soft skills are Communication and interpersonal skills. Critical and creative thinking, Personal effectiveness, Integrity and Ethical Conduct, Teaching Competence, Societal and Civic Responsibilities, Leadership, Research management, Knowledge mobilization and knowledge translation, Career Management. Helena J & Bhebe T B (2016) found that the ten soft skills that employers in Zimbabwe felt critical for graduate employees to possess are: critical thinking, morality teamwork, ethics, anger management/ self-control,

communication skills, integrity, reliability/trustworthiness, self-confidence, and understanding the work culture. A research conducted in order to identify the soft skills required by local and multinational companies operating in Malaysia and to identify the contributing factors of 'graduates' unemployment by Hairi, B A F B, Toee M N B A and Razzaly C W B (2011) found that the five essential soft skills criteria needed by the employer in the working place in order of importance are Communication skill, Teamwork, Decision Making & Problem Solving, Creative & Critical Thinking and Program & Project Management skill.

Employers perceived positive attitudes and behaviors, for example, working cooperatively with others; being responsible and adaptable; the ability to resolve conflict; communicating effectively in oral and written English; and a strong commitment to learning continuously, as extremely important qualities in graduates. Some of the more 'appropriate attitudes and abilities' such as 'being responsible and adaptable' were perceived by researchers as being consistent with a command-control system, rather than a market economy Velda, C. (2009). Study by Williams, A C (2015) found that for entry-level jobs, communication was the most important and the most lacking soft skill. In contrast to the findings discussed above a study using Human Resource Development (HRD) faculty in Morocco, Europe, and one university in the United States, as well as employers of HRD graduates in Morocco, El Mansour, B. and Dean, J.C. (2016) found that Morocco, (an emerging country), doesn't yet count communication skills and the use of technology as necessary employability skills, these skills are not perceived to be important at the moment due to limited usage of technology in the training and development of human resources.

Among the studies conducted for Sri Lanka Herath, H.M.T.S and Ranasinghe, A. (2011) investigated into the assessment of private sector employers towards recruiting business graduates in Sri Lanka. The study investigated 65 of private sector business firms who are the possible employers of providing job opportunities for potential employees in Sri Lanka. Findings of the study showed that among the other state university graduates but except engineers and doctors, business graduates have more or less the necessary skills and qualities needed to work in private sector work places. But those skills and qualities are not up to the standard expected by the private sector employers. Among those skills Sri Lankan business graduates especially lack ICT skills, English language proficiency and the applicability of practical knowledge. Hence the business graduates of Sri Lanka should improve the essential skills, attitudes and qualities in order to create a good demand for them in the available job market and to complete with

other professionally qualified personnel. A study on engineering graduates by Shyamaloo, M.M.G.V. Wickramasinghe, W.M.V.S.K. Dissanayake S. (2013) employability skills that were most critical are identified as Engineering Design and Construction Standards, Working Attitude, Management Skills, Personal Attitude, Technical and Administrative Skills and Engineering Knowledge. Dolage, D.A.R. and Heath, C.N. (2014) investigated into the soft skill requirement of graduates seeking employment, according to the perspectives of four types of stakeholders namely, employers, academics, graduates and current students. Based on this, five most important soft skills were namely, Interpersonal, Leadership, Oral Communication, Decision making, and Team work. De Silva, G. (2015) highlighted the need for improving soft skills to improve the level of the IT industry of the country. Soft skills were identified of which communication abilities in spoken and written English were of paramount importance.

Suggestions for ways of improving soft skills:-

The research study by Washor, K S (2015) was designed to understand the degree to which internships enhance student soft-skill development, specifically in the areas of communication, teamwork, initiative, and, analytical thinking. Findings suggested that participating in an internship contributes to student soft-skill development. A research conducted by "Campos" (2015) found that recent US college graduates and employers agree that a certificate course in soft skills training would be beneficial for college students. A descriptive study by McCale, C (2008) portrays the benefits undergraduate marketing students derive from completing experiential learning activities - specifically client-based projects. No one experiential learning activity can provide benefits to all students, nor is activity appropriate in all situations. Liberal arts students as well as business students could certainly benefit from the hands on approach a client based project can provide. From the research, it appears that female undergraduate marketing students appear to derive more perceived benefits in the tested areas than do their male counterparts as a whole - particularly in the marketing research course. Williams, A C (2015) investigated the perceptions of students and employers related to the soft skills needed to be successful in future employment. The recommendations informed the creation of a mandatory 3-day professional development training program, which was developed to help students enhance their soft skills before entering their future careers. Soft skills are just as important as technical skills; soft skills complement the technical skills. Higher educational institutions need to help students to hone the relevant soft skills as employers place

significant importance on soft skills. Soft skills training strategies should be tailored to meet the needs of students and employers.

A study based on Sri Lanka by Ravindran K and Bandara CMYSS (2018) have found that factors affecting the acquisition of soft skills can be identified under six major categories; awareness and preference; impact of society; teaching methods and classroom activities; Observation and self-motivation; Infrastructure and technology; University exposure where all the factors show positive impacts on soft skill acquisition. Thus, the study suggested that improving the condition of those factors would make a more favorable ground for skill acquisition with regard to university students.

Perception of the employer and the perception of the Graduate/ Faculty on soft skills:-

Crawford, L. P., Fink S., Dalton W. R., & Heltz L. (2011) from Michigan State university conducted a survey on soft skills using employers, students, faculty and Alum have found that soft skills are ranked most important by employers and Alum while discipline knowledge is ranked most important by faculty and students.

The employers rank order of soft skill priorities is: Communication, Self-management, Teamwork, Decision-making/Problem solving, Experiences, Professionalism, and Leadership. All of the stakeholder groups agree Communication is the most important soft skill with Employers value listening as the top Communication characteristic; above oral and written skills. Employers value Teamwork higher than students and faculty in importance for new employees. Discussion includes issues such as: students seem to underestimate the importance of self-starting and that having a positive attitude is important to their future employers. Curricular implications are also discussed to enhance soft skill development. Crawford, P., Dalton, R. (2011).

A study conducted by "Campos" (2015) using major employers in southwestern Pennsylvania found that "Recent college graduates and employers agree that soft skills are important for workplace success. There is a gap between how prepared recent college graduates think they are, and how prepared employers find them to be. Recent college graduates and employers differ on which soft skills are most important. Further recent college graduates and employers differ greatly on which soft skills merit training.

Based on a study to explore employability skills that employers, university lecturers and graduates value to bring to the workplace, when graduates are applying for entry-level graduate jobs in the field of computer science in Sri Lanka Wickramasinghe, V. & Perera, L. (2010), suggested that

there are differences in the priorities given for employability skills by the four groups-male graduates, female graduates, employers, and university lecturers.

CONCLUSION

Majority of the studies were focusing on identifying soft skills of graduates which make them employable, on how to enhance soft skills and how the employer perceives soft skills in contrast to the graduate and the faculty.

Among many soft skills identified as important for an undergraduate communication skills was identified as the most important skill in all the studies except for one done for Morocco. For studies relating to Sri Lanka also proves that English language skills - related to communication is of paramount importance.

Internships, soft skills training programs and project based learning are identified as the methods that can be used to enhance soft skills. In the case of Sri Lanka it was found that awareness and preference; impact of society; teaching methods and classroom activities; Observation and self-motivation; Infrastructure and technology; are modes that develop soft skills of graduates.

Although there is disagreement regarding the skills that receive priority for employers and Students/ Faculty, both parties agree on the soft skill requirements.

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