



## **Employability Analysis of Management External Degree Holders of Sri Lanka: Longitudinal Study Based on University of Sri Jayewardenepura**

**K. M. V. Sachitra<sup>1\*</sup> and U. A. Kumara<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>*Department of Commerce, Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Sri Lanka.*

<sup>2</sup>*Department of Business Economics, Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Sri Lanka.*

### **Authors' contributions**

*This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Author KMVS designed the study, managed the literature searches, wrote the protocol and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. Author UAK collected data, finalized the statistical analysis and the manuscript. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.*

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### **ABSTRACT**

**Aims:** The purpose of this study is to examine the nature of employability of the graduates receiving external management degrees in the Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce, University of Sri Jayewardenepura.

**Study Design:** The study used past three years' data gathered at the Convocation days held in year 2015, 2016 and 2017. It included graduates' demographic characteristics, employability and the nature of jobs engaged.

**Results:** The study provided quantitative results about the employability of external degree holders and the results showed that the employability rate of external degree holders was relatively high compared with the employability rate of the management graduate in Sri Lanka at the date of convocation. On the basis of findings, the study proves that business graduates possess average

\*Corresponding author: Email: vilani@sjp.ac.lk;

levels of employability skills in terms of technology and communication skills.

**Conclusion:** Although the results exemplify the initial step towards a description of employability of external degree holders, they shed light in terms of future development of the management external degree programmes. Presently, Sri Lanka meets the management employment expected, but in the future, management graduates need to realize that education is not all about to attain good marks but to explore and develop personal capabilities.

*Keywords: Employability; external degrees; management; longitudinal study.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

There are great expectations for the role of education in promoting inclusive development of a nation. Within that important role, the United Nations declared 2005-2014 as the 'Decade of Education for Sustainable Development' [1,2]. Derived from a neo-classical school of thought, originally, in economics, human capital theory speculates that individuals invest in training and education as a source of competitive advantage in the labor market [3]. In this context, higher education institutions play a vital role in producing educated professionals [4] with employment-ready skills [5]. These institutions are in a privileged position for generating awareness in future leaders regarding the responsibilities and opportunities offered by sustainable development [4, 6].

The field of management today is of paramount importance in the development process of the nation. Empowering the business community of the country will result a strengthened economy of the nation.

As far as concerning the Sri Lankan context, Sri Lanka has had a free education system from kindergarten to undergraduate education since 1945 [7]. After completing 13<sup>th</sup> grade, students have different higher education opportunities in both public and private universities and institutions. However, tertiary education is still dominated by state-owned universities. Students who want to study management discipline in Sri Lanka have an overwhelming number of options to choose from. Nearly 80 percent of Sri Lanka's state universities and other higher education institutions offer management related degree programs.

Among these higher education institutions, the Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce (FMSC) of the University of Sri Jayewardenepura (SJP) spearheads the development of management education in Sri Lanka. The FMSC is also the first and foremost choice of the

students who aspire to pursue their higher education in management after secondary school. With the emerging requirements of the society particularly in higher education sector, the FMSC offers 12 internal degree programmes in order to enhance the knowledge in the sphere of management. However, due to a limited number of internal placements, only few students are fortunate to realize their dream of continuing their education at the premier management faculty in Sri Lanka. Chhinzer [8] stated that individuals are constantly in a state of competition to maximize their position in the labor market, thereby creating upward pressure on the education system and increasing demands for higher levels of education.

In order to facilitate who have been deprived of pursuing higher education as an internal student due to limited opportunities, the FMSC has taken a great effort to continue conducting of External Degree programmes in Management. In spite of offers, the FMSC offers 3 degree programmes for externally registered students since 1976. These programmes are B.Sc. Business Administration (General) External Degree (BUS), B.Sc. Management (Public) General (External) Degree (PUB) and the Bachelor of Commerce (General) External Degree (COM) programme. These three degree programmes are conducted by the Department of Business Administration, Department of Public Administration and Department of Commerce respectively. Before 2014, there was no restriction towards the student's registration for external degrees. However, in 2014, the government imposed the student registration by limiting number of externally registered students exactly to the internally registered. For example, if state universities register 1000 students for internal degree programmes, externally registered students need to be limit to 1000 for external degree programmes. It is worth to note that there is no age limit for external students and they must meet the minimum entry requirement possessed by the universities. Accordingly, by following the given rules and regulations, the

FMSC continues to secure the highest adult education attainment to provide a competitive advantage in the labour market.

As Kumara [9] emphasise, the returns of investments of education is a highly researchable area and it is required to quantify the benefits of the investments to the nation as a whole. As such, employable graduate is a key interest area over the state university system in Sri Lanka [9] due to emergence of non-state universities, especially in management discipline. The term 'employability' is defined as a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations [10]. Lowden [11] defined employability as the collection of skills, attributes, and characteristics that employers expect from workers. Thus, the most immediate and relevant aspects to graduates' employability are finding a job and becoming employed [12]. However, Chhinzer [8] argued that there is a lack of research to indicate how employability may be uniquely defined for graduates and they highlighted that professional maturity including overall communication, time management, teamwork, attention to detail, acceptance of feedback, and willingness to work to create a holistic awareness is the dominant factor considered by employers when assessing graduate employability.

In line with internal degree programmes, the FMSC conducts regular analysis regarding employability status, employability opinion and degree programme evaluation on internal special degree holders [13,9]. However, there is not enough evidence available in recent analysis on external degree holders. Hence, the present study is conducted to overcome this empirical gap. The purpose of this study is to analyze the nature of employability of external degree holders of the FMSC in 2015, 2016 and 2017. Thus, the study also intends to compare the employability and different demographic factors regarding those graduates in order to improve the quality of the external graduates of the FMSC in the future.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

A quantitative research design was used to investigate the nature of employability of external degree holders and compare the employability and different demographic factors regarding those graduates. The study utilized purposive

sampling in University of Sri Jayewardenepura in Sri Lanka. This university is recognized as the one with the largest undergraduate population in density and is recognised as a pioneer of higher education in management. Further it is ranked among the top five universities in Sri Lanka [14]. A structured questionnaire was prepared and it contained the demographic characteristics in terms of age, gender, participation to the seminar programmes offered by the respective Departments, participation to external supporting classes and employability and the nature of jobs engaged by the graduates. In addition, the questionnaire included the items relating computer and language competencies of graduates. The questionnaire was prepared in Sinhala language since majority of external degree holders have obtained their degree in Sinhala language. The total number of external graduates in 2015, 2016 and 2017 were 2182, 1486 and 1610 respectively. The survey was conducted at the Convocation days held in year 2015, 2016 and 2017. There were 1545, 1425 and 1558 external degree holders completed the questionnaire, giving the response rate 71%, 95% and 96% in 2015, 2016 and 2017 respectively. Data analysis was performed mainly in descriptive statistics where SPSS version 21 was used as the statistical software.

## 3. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

### 3.1 Demographic Factor Analysis

In terms of degree type, highest number of students follows BUS indicating 1335 degree holders (86.4%) in 2015. Balance is divided among COM (153) and PUB (57) with percentages of 9.9 and 3.7 respectively. In 2016, there were 1167, 63 and 193 graduates from the BUS, PUB and COM and in 2017 there were 1320, 197 and 88 graduates from the BUS, PUB and COM respectively. The comparative analysis on demographic characteristics of the respondents in 2015, 2016 and 2017 were presented in the following Tables.

Table 1 indicates gender-based analysis of external degree holders. The higher percentage of females has managed to complete the degree compared to male candidates in three degree programmes. Except PUB, there was no significant difference in graduation rate of male and female external degree holders.

Table 2 illustrates the comparison of age groups and degree programmes.

**Table 1. Analysis on gender**

Description			2015		2016		2017	
			Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
Degree Programme	BUS	Count	1075	259	946	221	981	294
		% within Degree Programme	80.6%	19.4%	81.1%	18.9%	76.9%	23.1%
	COM	Count	112	41	141	52	66	20
		% within Degree Programme	73.2%	26.8%	73.1%	26.9%	76.7%	23.3%
	PUB	Count	45	12	42	21	160	37
		% within Degree Programme	78.9%	21.1%	66.7%	33.3%	81.2%	18.8%

**Table 2. Analysis on age groups**

Age	Degree programme									
	2015			2016			2017			
	BUS	COM	PUB	BUS	COM	PUB	BUS	COM	PUB	
20-29	Count	940	117	24	562	129	10	246	67	95
	%	70.6%	76.5%	42.1%	48.2%	66.8%	15.9%	19.3%	77.9%	48.2%
30-39	Count	381	30	29	584	59	45	976	14	76
	%	28.6%	19.6%	50.9%	50.0%	30.6%	71.4%	76.6%	16.3%	38.6%
40-49	Count	10	6	4	19	5	6	49	4	23
	%	0.8%	3.9%	7.0%	1.6%	2.6%	9.5%	3.8%	4.7%	11.7%
< 50	Count	1	0	0	02	0	2	3	1	3
	%	0.1%	0	0	0.2%	0	3.2%	0.2%	1.2%	1.5%

**Table 3. Participation of external supporting classes**

			Participate external supporting class					
			2015		2016		2017	
			Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Degree	BUS	Count	1253	80	1060	109	1114	159
		%	94.0%	6.0%	90.7%	9.3%	87.5%	12.5%
	COM	Count	96	56	84	109	43	43
		%	63.2%	36.8%	43.5%	56.5%	50.0%	50.0%
	PUB	Count	44	13	37	26	83	114
		%	77.2%	22.8%	58.7%	41.3%	42.1%	57.9%
Total	Count	1393	150	1181	244	1240	316	
	%	90.3%	9.7%	71.0%	29.0%	79.7%	20.3%	

As shown in Table 2, by age, the majority of external degree holders fall into the age category of year 20 – 29 and year 30 – 39. In here, more than 50% of COM degree holders are age between Year 20 – 29. Further, more than 50% of PUB degree holders are age between Year 30 – 39.

Since externally students have no opportunity to participate the lecture series as internally registered students have been obtained, the three departments that the above mentioned have organized the regular seminar series. The seminar series were conducted at weekends for each degree part for the

three degree programmes in order facilitate for knowledge acquiring. Hence, this study interested to see the pattern of participating for the seminar series. Accordingly, almost 51% has participated where balance 49% have not. Among three programmes, PUB recorded the highest participation rate for all degree parts seminars. It was almost more than 85% in all degree parts. Seminar Part III participation in BUS and COM degree programmes were relatively higher than other two parts.

Further, the survey asked to indicate the reason/s for not participating the seminars.

Majority of the respondents revealed that job constraints, transportation and accommodation issues and participating to tuition classes were main reasons for not attending the seminars. Only few respondents revealed that they had financial constraint as well as indicated that self-study helped them to complete the degree.

In addition to the seminar participations, to support these externally registered students' attainment of a degree, non-state education institutions also provide learner support services by conducting external supporting classes during weekends. These classes are arranged across the country, mainly cities including high population density. In this manner, the study examined the participation trends of external support classes (Table 3).

Almost 90% of BUS Degree holders have claimed they participated to external supporting classes. The lowest participation rate of external supporting classes was recorded in COM degree programme (nearly 50%). However, in 2016 out of three external degree holders, 71% holders indicated that they participate seminars

conducted by the respective departments as well as external supporting classes and in 2017, it was 68%. Concerning the total rate in 2015, there was a significant drop down in participation rate in 2016 and 2017. This could be considered as a positive sign for the usefulness of the seminar series conducted by the respective departments.

### 3.2 Employability Analysis

The most important analysis of this study was the employability comparison of the three degree programmes. Hillage [15] defined employability as the ability to find and retain employment and De Vos [16] conceptualised employability as the continuous fulfilling, acquiring or creating of work through the optimal use of competencies. In line with that, result in Table 4 indicated that almost 67% has confirmed that they are employed either at private or government sector and this trend almost same for the selected three years. In line with that, a considerable percentage of 33 remains unemployed after obtaining the degree. In terms of type of the degree and employability, nearly 68% of bus, 53% of com

**Table 4. Analysis on employability**

			Doing a job or not					
			2015		2016		2017	
			Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Degree Type	BUS	Count	907	422	794	372	907	422
		%	68.2%	31.8%	68.1%	31.9%	68.2%	31.8%
	COM	Count	81	71	140	50	81	71
		%	53.3%	46.7%	73.7%	26.3%	53.3%	46.7%
	PUB	Count	46	11	56	7	46	11
		%	80.7%	19.3%	88.9%	11.1%	80.7%	19.3%
Total	Count	1035	504	990	429	1035	504	
	%	67.3%	32.7%	69.8%	30.2%	67.3%	32.7%	

**Table 5. Analysis on job category**

			Job category							
			2015		2016			2017		
			Public	Private	Public	Private	Own business	Public	Private	Own business
Degree	BUS	Count	468	439	399	388	9	474	416	40
		%	51.6%	48.4%	50.1%	48.7%	1.1%	51.0%	44.7%	4.3%
	COM	Count	46	35	61	75	4	22	27	2
		%	56.8%	43.2%	43.6%	53.6%	2.9%	43.1%	52.9%	3.9%
	PUB	Count	40	6	50	6	0	116	39	0
		%	87.0%	13.0%	89.3%	10.7%	0.0%	74.8%	25.2%	0.0%
Total	Count	554	481	510	469	13	612	482	42	
	%	53.5%	46.5%	51.4%	47.3%	1.3%	53.9%	42.4%	3.7%	

**Table 6. Analysis of computer competency**

			Computer skill		
			Poor	Average	Excellent
Degree	BUS	Count	4	661	600
		%	0.3%	52.3%	47.4%
	COM	Count	0	47	38
		%	0.0%	55.3%	44.7%
	PUB	Count	2	74	117
		%	1.0%	38.3%	60.6%
Total	Count		6	782	755
	%		0.4%	50.7%	48.9%

**Table 7. Analysis of English language competency**

			Degree			Total
			BUS	COM	PUB	
<b>Reading</b>	Excellent	Count	577	44	110	731
		%	45.4%	51.2%	57.0%	47.2%
	Average	Count	690	41	83	814
		%	54.3%	47.7%	43.0%	52.5%
Poor	Count	4	1	0	5	
	%	0.3%	1.2%	0.0%	0.3%	
<b>Writing</b>	Excellent	Count	450	34	91	575
		%	35.4%	39.5%	47.2%	37.1%
	Average	Count	811	51	102	964
		%	63.9%	59.3%	52.8%	62.2%
Poor	Count	9	1	0	10	
	%	0.7%	1.2%	0.0%	0.6%	
<b>Listening</b>	Excellent	Count	415	31	93	539
		%	32.8%	36.0%	48.2%	34.9%
	Average	Count	840	52	99	991
		%	66.4%	60.5%	51.3%	64.1%
Poor	Count	11	3	1	15	
	%	0.9%	3.5%	0.5%	1.0%	
<b>Speaking</b>	Excellent	Count	201	16	41	258
		%	15.9%	18.6%	21.2%	16.7%
	Average	Count	994	63	147	1204
		%	78.5%	73.3%	76.2%	77.9%
Poor	Count	71	7	5	83	
	%	5.6%	8.1%	2.6%	5.4%	

and 80% pub degree holders are employed. As shown, relative three degrees, com recorded the highest unemployed rate (almost 46%). Concerning the sector, public sector claims highest percentage of employability which is 54% where private sector also accounts for 46%.

Concerning the sector, public sector claims highest percentage of employability for the three programmes which is nearly 54% where private sector also accounts for 46%.

Further, Table 5 indicates that public sector claims highest percentage of employability in

BUS and PUB Degrees, which is more than 50%. However, COM Degree holders claimed the highest employability in private sector. It is interesting to highlight that, relative to 2015 and 2016, 42 degree holders are engaging with their own business in 2017. The graduates expressed their view of entrepreneurial intention being in part about the credentials of their degrees and this credential would assist our nation to uplift the opportunities in labour market.

Meanwhile, the study examined the nature of job position of external degree holders. In terms of degree programmes type and nature of job

position, the majority of degree holders in three degree programmes are employed as clerks which accounts 54.3%, 44.6% and 33% in 2015, 2016 and 2017 respectively. The second highest job position is executive officers. Within COM degree holders, job position of teacher recorded the considerably significant portion (nearly 10%). It is also notified that few of these graduates are employed as laborers as well. There was a gradual increment in the labour job position, where in 2015 it was counted as 1.2%, in 2016 1.5% and 1.6% in 2017. Moreover, when analyzing data related to gender and nature of job involved, nearly 85% of females are employed as clerks where males have the highest record in technical officer (51%).

Considering the role of education as a proxy measure for an individual's employability and the growth in graduate level education as a competitive advantage in the labor market, it is important to determine how graduates assess their competency in computer applications. This is very much important because there have been concerns raised by many scholars that the knowledge of the discipline of management is not sufficient without it being accompanied by technology skills and competencies that enable students to apply it in a real-world technological setting [17]. With that much of concerns, the study intended to examine the computer competency of the degree holders and this examination was conducted in 2017 survey. The computer application competency was measured with ability to working with MS office tools, internet usage and dealing with online transactions. All items are used subjective measures with a scale ranging from 'poor' to 'excellent'. Table 6 illustrates the level of computer competency of the degree holders.

As shown in Table 6, little more than 50% of respondents recorded the average competency level of their computer skills. In line with that, PUB Degree holders (60.6%) indicated that they have excellent computer skill. It is interested to note that very few graduates have poor confidence on their computer skills. The result shows that external degree holders possess average basic computer literacy. This provides evidence that it is not enough to only having the knowledge of the management discipline, knowledge should be accompanied with technology skills and competencies. As such, possibility of being employable graduate is influenced by technological competency, therefore as Miller [18] stated, graduates need to

be assisted in setting realistic expectations for what is required of them.

In spite of technological skills, Bennett [19] further revealed that communication as the top most skill requirement for management jobs and it is the most frequently used skill to investigate employability [20]. Similarly, communication skill is reported as the most requirement for fresh graduates in management discipline [21]. This is also applicable into workplace in Sri Lankan context [22] in terms of English language competency. Further, it is also important to understand the English language competency of external degree holders because the majority of degree holders have obtained their external degree in Sinhala language. Good communicator requires to be a good reader, writer, listener and speaker [23]. Thus, this survey also investigated the English language competency of the degree holders with respect on reading, writing, listening and speaking skill (Table 7). Aforementioned, desired items are used subjective measures with a scale ranging from 'poor' to 'excellent'.

As shown in Table 7, three external degree holders have confirmed that their English language competency in reading, writing, listening and speaking were at average level. The highest excellent level of competence was recorded in English reading skill, whereas the highest poor competence level was recorded for speaking skill. Jobs in public and private sector organizations are based on coordinated work with public, clients, colleagues and top-level management. The result of this study extends the prior findings [24,20] that communication skills exert highest influence on employability of graduates.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The main purpose of this study is to present the employability and different demographic factors of external graduates with reference to the passed-out graduates of the B.Sc. Business Administration (General) External Degree, B.Sc. Management (Public) General (External) Degree and the Bachelor of Commerce (General) External Degree in 2015, 2016 and 2017. Since the study used longitudinal data, it captured the student expectation in higher education in terms of teaching quality, course quality and administrative quality and confirm the variance of perceptions over time.

The study performed comparative analysis on critical areas such as age, gender, participation

to the seminar programmes offered by the respective Departments, participation to external supporting classes, employability and the nature of jobs engaged by the graduates of the three external degree programmes. The results indicated that higher percentage of females has managed to complete the degree compared to male candidates and the majority of the degree holders fall into the age category of year 20 – 39. This is emphasized that the FMSC generated young educated output to the management discipline. There were no significant changes in overall seminar participation in BUS and PUB degree programmes. However, overall seminar participation rate in COM has been declined. This sheds light to pay special attention towards the seminar conducting process by the Department of Commerce. Further, when analysing three years figures, both BUS and COM degree programmes have to consider special attention on Degree Part I and II seminar series participation. It is interesting to notify that private class participation in three degree programmes was getting declined relative to 2015. This declining trend needs to be addressed by the three departments in order to uplift the interest of students to participate seminar programmes conducted by the departments.

Overall, at the date of convocation, the employability rate of external degree holders was higher. Generally, employability rate of the management graduate in Sri Lanka at the date of convocation is 66% [14]. There was a slight change in overall employability rate of three degree programmes. However, with respect to the individual programmes, PUB and COM degree holders' employability rates were increased significantly. Further, private sector employability rate was increased compared to 2015. The analysis on gender and employability indicated that both male and female degree holders' employability rate were increased compared to 2015. In line with that, the majority of the degree holders were employed as clerks, hence the nature of the job position was not significantly changed during the desired time period.

Identification of employability skills can also be used as a developmental tool to make graduates think about employability in terms of their strengths and possible areas for improvement [25]. The analysis of this study suggested that fresh graduates of today need to realize that education is not all about to attain good marks

but to explore and develop personal capabilities such as technological and communication skills, for achieving success in career and life as well [26]. Therefore, employability support in higher education institutions should be more holistic and go beyond the set of skills that one can acquire or be taught [27]. This might be somewhat critical for externally registered students because the universities are unable to view these students' requirements with serious attention as internally registered students. Thus, this provides challenges for the universities that offered external degrees as they try to play a vital role in producing educated professionals with employment-ready skills to take on the challenges of modern-day employment. Meanwhile, it is interested to note that, all stakeholder now accept that existing skill gaps do not represent a failure of universities only but the outcome of poor collaboration among educationists, employers and graduates [28]. As such, this argument sheds light in terms of future development of the management external degree programmes with the collaboration of relevant stakeholders.

Despite contributing insights to the higher education literature, this study suffers from some limitations that are worthwhile to mention. While this research is novel in external degree holders' perspective, the post-hoc nature of the assessment limits the results in following ways. First, the sample used in the survey was limited to the external degree holders in single state university in Sri Lanka, which may result in limited generalizability. Hence, future studies would be benefited by collecting data and replicating the study in other universities that offer external degree which would lead to develop a unified view on a higher educational system's success. Second, even though the study used longitudinal data to capture the variance of perceptions in terms of teaching quality, course quality and administrative quality over time, it was only designed to capture the perception of the graduates alone. Thus, future studies can incorporate the other stakeholders' view on external degree holders including society, employers, and government agencies.

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## COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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