

The Influence of Bachelor of Arts from Sri Lanka State Universities on the Graduates' Employability: A review of the Gaps between Bachelor of Arts Outcomes and the Employers' Expectations

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Abstract

This study was conducted to investigate whether the current Bachelor of Arts (B.A) degrees outcomes from Sri Lanka state universities affect their employability in the job market. This helped to determine the relationships inherent among factors such working experience, academic reputation, and soft skills that are possessed by a B.A graduate and the extent to which each one of these factors affects their employability.

The study relied on data from 150 participants selected through stratified sampling followed by simple sampling from the strata (3 strata each having 50 participants). The data was analyzed quantitatively using the hypothesis testing technique, which was appropriate to test if there were mean differences in the average responses of respondents across the various research variables.

The results revealed that there are gaps in B.A skills requirements between Sri Lanka state university outcomes and the employers' expectations. These gaps are majorly on the soft skills, which include the oral and written communication skills, numeracy skills, computer skills, time management and responsibilities, professionalism, problem solving skills, and graduates' such as taking initiative and willingness to learn, graduates' ability to work in a team, and their interpersonal skills. The research concluded that having studied at a popular university for a B.A degree is not a determinant of securing employment. In addition, B.A skills requirement is invariant across employers from different industries.

Key words: Bachelor of Arts, Working experience, Academic reputation, Soft skills, Employability

Introduction

Most recently, the education sector worldwide has witnessed increased emphasis by countries on the need to educate their citizens. Especially in the developing countries, the insistence of the necessity of education has been greatly attributed to the perception that it is necessary for economic growth (Aistrich, Saghafi, and Sciglimpaglia, 2006). As one of the developing countries in the world, Sri Lanka has followed the trend whereby it has put in place measures aimed at funding the education from the primary to tertiary level. In addition, the government has established over the years various state universities in which learners can access higher education at a subsidized cost. These institutions of higher learning include the University of Colombo, University of Moratuwa, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, among others that add up to 20 universities (Ministry of Higher Education 2014). These 20 universities were established in order to offer quality education that would ensure the steady supply of qualified and diverse professionals for the various industries in the country, hence to stimulate economic growth and uplift the living standards of its people (Unicef, 2015, Noe, 2013). Since the quality of education greatly affects the employment levels within a given economy or country, it is imperative that the education offered by institutions of higher learning through the facilitation of the Sri Lankan government should be quality.

This would help to realize the vision of the country, which is to provide employment for all. As a result, the institutions of higher learning in the country have a mandate to ensure that the skills transferred to the learners or pre-graduates are in tandem with specific requirement demanded by the employers in order to enhance their employability (Sheriffdeen, 2012).

Problem Statement

Where lower enrolment rate into state universities correlates with lower literacy levels, Riboud and Tan (2009) are concerned that the Sri Lankan government has reduced its investment levels in public and state university education, which historically stood at 2.5% of the gross domestic product (GDP) to about 1.9% of the GDP. As a result of lower investment in the education sector by the government, to some extents the quality of education is hampered, and ultimately the employability of the graduates in tandem with the requirements of the job market (Sheriffdeen, 2012). Despite the efforts by the government in establishing the Sri Lanka Qualifications Framework (SLQF), in a bid to improve the quality of higher education, Dissanayake (2010) expressed concern that a great number of state university graduates still are and remain unemployed after completion of their respective courses, especially for the B.A graduates.

In such scenarios, some Bachelor of Arts graduates are said to remain for many years before getting a job, while others get the job immediately they graduate (Davey 2010). This creates

information gap between graduates, about what it takes to get the job immediately after graduation (Wilkins, 2007). There are also unverified claims that female Bachelor of Arts graduates secure job much more easily than their male counterparts do, even after going through the same education system (Stiwne & Alves, 2010). Though such claims are still unverified, they create skills gaps about male and female graduates' employability.

Hence, the present study aims to review the gaps between Bachelor of Arts outcomes and the employers' expectations. This is because by defining these gaps clearly, free of speculations, it is possible to recommend the appropriate way forward to bridging them.

Research aims and objectives

The following objectives were aimed by the study.

- To explore the various skills and experience requirements that employer expects from prospective employees.
- To find out the various skills and experiences that universities impart learners.
- To enumerate the differences in B.A specific skills requirements of skills, academic reputation, and practical skills between the employers and institutions of higher learning,
- To investigate whether demographic factors of prospective graduates impacts on their employability.
- To profile the differences in B.A skills requirements (overall soft skills, overall academic reputation, and overall practical experience) across different industries

Literature Review

State University Education in Sri Lanka

There are only 20 state universities in Sri Lanka (Ministry of Higher Education, 2014). Where many middle and lower-income countries around the world report about 23% to 43% in enrollment rates of qualified candidates into state-owned universities, Chauhan (2008) is concerned that Sri Lanka drags behind with an enrolment of only 17% of the qualified candidates. According to Schofer & Meyer (2005), the 17% enrolment rate reported by Chauhan (2008) blocks almost 100,000 of qualified students from joining into the university education system.

Because of the lower investment in the education system lack of vital facilities such as computer labs, student workshops, books, and others that would have otherwise been vital in improving the skills of the learners to match the job market requirements. This is because Dissanayake (2010) expressed concerns that a great number of state university graduates still are and remain unemployed after completion of their respective courses, especially for the Bachelor of Arts graduates. This may create a dilemma for institutions of higher learning about why invest in improving the literacy when actually only a few graduates can secure jobs.

De Silva (2011) has hypothesized that many state universities in Sri Lanka are shifting to e-learning as the solution to increasing their enrolment rates, in attempts to boost the literacy levels in the country, it is not guaranteed that the quality of the university education and employability of graduates will improve due others factors that may play role. In another instance, Arunatilake (2006) has asserted that the deficiencies in the state university education of Sri Lanka are due to the governance of universities at a national government level as opposed to a devolved subject.

Review on employability and factors affecting graduates employability

As Wickramasinghe & Perera (2010) have contended, no single construct can exhaustively define employability. Being a multi-dimensional construct, employability could either mean the ability of fresh graduates to secure employment for the first time; the ability of an already employed graduate to change positions successfully at the same employer; and the ability of changing employment from one employer to another employer. According to Moy (2006) and Aistrich et al. (2006), graduates employability is multi-faceted and may take different forms. This includes the subjective perceptions of the employers about what they feel represents ideal factors to look out from new graduates (Moy 2006). In addition, it includes the objective perceptions of higher institutions of learning, such as state universities, where the senate monitors education quality, that graduates who have fulfilled the requirements of their respective degrees are employable in those respective careers (Aistrich et al., 2006).

According to Culkin & Mallick (2011), studies about the lapse between university education and employability have recently become common. The topic has attracted different stakeholders, which include but not limited to the employers, universities, and graduates among others (De Vos, De Hauw, & Van der Heijden, 2011). With different stakeholders participating differently to the topic of education and graduate employability, some researchers have compared the different perceptions of the various stakeholders (De Vos et al., 2011); studies on the skills gaps; the contributing factors; and their implication on the employability of graduates (Fallows & Steven, 2008).

According to van der Heijden, Boon, van der Klink & Meijs (2009) the concept of employability takes two dimensions. These are the organizational perspective and the individual perspective. The organizational perspective is concerned with the ability of organizations to attract qualified graduates who can suit to the employment needs of the specific organizations (Van Der Heijden et al., 2009). On the other hand, individual perspective revolves around the ability of graduates in securing employment opportunities that match their qualifications and skills in the competitive labor market (Van Der Heijden et al., 2009).

A study conducted by Finch, Hamilton, Baldwin & Zehner (2013) classified these factors into five categories that included soft skills, pre-graduate experience, problem-solving skills, functional job-specific skills, and the academic reputation of the graduates seeking jobs. Each of these categories has attracted different responses from different researchers, with postulations from

Pool & Sewell (2007) that graduates who possess a certain category of employability factors are in a better position to secure employment opportunities as opposed to those who lack those factors.

However, a study conducted by Andrews & Russell (2012) attributed this gap to the fact that employers rarely communicate their expectations to the institutions of higher learning so that they implement industry-specific skills and knowledge among the prospective graduates. According to Finch et al. (2013), although academic reputation is an important factor that impacts on the employability in general. In a simulation study conducted by Avramenko (2012), it emerged that the ability of graduates to bridge the gap between theory and practice is a major factor affecting their employability.

Table 1: Review on employability and factors affecting graduates employability

Skills	Attributes	Attitudes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oral and written communication skills (Finch et al., 2013). • Problem-solving skills, Academic reputation of the graduates seeking jobs (Finch et al., 2013), • Time management skills (Davey, 2010) • Computer-related skills (Sewell & Pool, 2010) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professionalism • system thinking and critical thinking (Rosenberg et al., 2012) • Over qualification or under qualification (Scurry & Blenkinsopp, 2012) • Decision-making and initiative (Sutherland, 2008) • Imagination and creativity (Cox & King, 2006) • Ability to take responsibility (Davey, 2010) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interpersonal skills[working in diverse teams](Andrews & Russell, 2012) • Graduates’ willingness to learn (Fallows & Steven, 2008) • Eagerness to adapt to the ever-changing workplace dynamics (Fallows & Steven ,2008) • Willingness to work independently and under workplace pressure (Ehiyazaryan & Barraclough, 2009)

Qualities that employers seek from potential employees

From the employers’ point of view, qualities for graduates’ employability vary depending on profession, position, and the employer (Mohamed & Shayeb, 2013 ; Tuyet, 2014). However, Tucker, Sojka, Barone & McCarthy (2000) points out that some generic skills and qualities are common despite the profession, position, or even the employer. In a research conducted on the issues of graduates’ underemployment, Scurry & Blenkinsopp (2012) found out that over qualification or under qualification of graduates were major reasons why some graduates remain unemployed.

In a study conducted by Fallows & Steven (2008) on employability of graduates, it emerged that graduates’ willingness to learn and eagerness to adapt to the ever-changing workplace

dynamics are some of the major qualities that employers expect from prospective employees. Employers value teamwork, communication skills, decision-making, initiative, and problem-solving skills (Andrews & Russell, 2012). This is echoed in the work of Sutherland (2008) postulating that employers seek to have a workforce that; communicates issues affecting them, can adapt to changing work environment, expects learning to be a continuous process even after completion of university education, and can harmoniously work towards the goals of the organization as a team. In a study conducted by Cox & King (2006), many employers value imagination and creativity. Cox & King (2006) accrued this to the fact that employers need to have employees who are capable of coming up with new ideas that could be used for the benefit of the organization.

Role of Employers in Employment

However, Wilkins (2007) opined that it is the company's responsibility to train their employees in order to match the needs required by the organization. In concurrence with Wilkins (2007), Rae (2007) remarked that employers should provide employee with development opportunities within their organizational model so that they can sharpen their skills. This would contribute positively to employee employability because their development in terms of training and promotions exposes them to new skills and experiences.

According to Lowden (2011), there is a need for employers to execute their roles first by conducting an environmental scan on the job market to avoid creating unprecedented levels of unemployment rates. This is because employers' involvement in malpractices such as employee poaching might mean lack of jobs to fresh graduates and hence increased unemployment rates. It is for this reason that Samo & Svetlik (2014) recommended that employers should as well play their roles in an ethical and professional manner. They should act as role models to their employees if they expect them to achieve high performance and poses the right skills.

Role of Institutions of Higher Learning on Employability

According to Anderson, Bravenboer & Hemsworth (2012) institutions of higher learning have the responsibility of furnishing learners with industry-specific skills in their respective courses. Institutions can achieve this by providing graduates with academic knowledge and information about the competitive job market. As Romaniuk & Snart (2000) suggest, it is rarely possible for a graduate in a certain course to secure employment in an industry or organization not aligned to the course undertaken at the university. Finch et al. (2013) in fact support this argument and suggest that the role of institutions of higher learning is to instill academic reputation in learners.

Apart from training graduates to meet the demand of the job market, through provision of academic reputation, Dana (2010) postulates that institutions of higher learning also have a role in fostering relativity and innovation. This is because many employers prefer potential employees to have problem-solving skills, which is a product of creativity and innovation (Dana

2010). They believe that since the workplace dynamics are changing, they need employees who can handle problems that emanate from the changing working conditions.

In another instance, Andrews & Russell (2012) recommended that educators and institutions of higher learning have the responsibility of instilling positive attitudes (eg. willingness to learn in dynamic environment, working with team members, and willingness to take initiative) towards work among the prospective graduates. This is because, no matter how much academic reputation a graduate has, lack of these attitudes makes them turn down the readily available jobs rendering them to remain jobless (Connor & Shaw, 2008). In addition to instilling soft skills, like communication (written and oral) and numeracy skills, institutions of higher learning also have the responsibility of guidance and counseling (Marlow & Patton, 2002).

Role of fresh graduates in Employment

According to Chauhan (2008), many employers are unhappy about the quality of fresh graduates at the beginning of their employment possibly due to lack of certain skills and qualities. Saunders & Zuzel (2010) strongly believe that graduates have the greatest role to play in securing employment. In support of Saunders & Zuzel (2010), Plastrik, Seltzer & Taylor (2003) assert that the of the graduates towards work, such as perception that work is complex or not well paying, are what determine if they are employable or not.

According to Perrone & Margaret (2003), graduates need to gain work experience prior to the completion of their higher education in order to enhance their employability after completion of their courses. One can gain such experience by participating in industrial attachments while on holidays (Polly, 2008). It also counts to participate in volunteer work or internship, which is after completion of higher education.

Necessity of Higher Education to Graduates in Securing Employment

According to McQuaid & Lindsay (2005), universities around the world keep reporting an increasing number of students enrolled in the various degree programs. The reason for the increasing demand for university education is due to the perception that being a graduate helps one to secure a job (Schomburg & Teichler, 2006).

However, the fact that many graduates are unemployed, despite having completed their university education, raises many questions that urge for answers. It also creates the perception that higher education is not necessary in securing a job (Elias & Purcell 2004). On the other hand, a study conducted by Li et al. (2008) revealed that employees in most organizations today at least have a degree, which again brings in the perception of higher education being a necessity in securing employment. In support of these two dilemmas, Purcell, Wilton, & Elias (2007) asserts that necessity of higher education for a graduate to secure a paying job is today a critical question.

In a study conducted by Weligamage (2009), to some extent the necessity of higher education in securing a graduate a job solely depends on the subjective decisions and preferences of the employer. In most cases, some employers give high preferences to people who have previous working experience (Rao, 2010), have previously participated in volunteer work (Paine, 2013), and those who poses certain skills and attitudes that impress them (Overtoom, 2000).

Research gap

There are several gaps in the literature that the research identified. Firstly, the literature talks about employability but does not specify the approximate number of years that graduates remain before getting a formal job. In addition, it does not elaborate whether employability are affected by issues such as gender of the graduates and the university attended. The literature fails to clearly define differences specific skills requirements (Soft skills, academic reputation, and practical skills) between the employers and institutions of higher learning and whether different employers value different set of skills. Finally, although the literature provides that employers should collaborate with the institutions of higher learning, there are not recommendations about how to go about. To bridge these gaps in previous studies, the following research hypothesis were formulates to testing.

- The average time that most B.A graduates remain before getting a formal employment is equal to 5 years.
- There is no difference, between male and female B.A graduates, in the average number of years spent without a formal employment.
- There is no mean difference in B.A specific skills requirements (Soft skills, academic reputation, and practical skills) between the employers and institutions of higher learning.
- There is no mean difference between the university attended and the ability of the B.A graduates to secure a job?
- There is no mean difference in B.A skills requirements (overall soft skills, overall academic reputation, and overall practical experience) across different industries.
- There is no relationship between numbers of years that B.A graduates remain unemployed and the overall perception that higher education is necessary in securing employment.
- There is no a mean difference in the overall importance that employers place on soft skills; academic reputation; and practical skills of B.A graduates.
- There is no mean difference between employers and universities in the perception that institutions of higher learning should liaise with employers to absorb B.A fresh graduates.
- There is no mean difference between employers and universities in the perception that employers should communicate their B.A skills expectations for institutions of higher learning to implement.

Research Methodology

Statistical population and sample: the statistical population of this study includes B.A graduates, lecturers from five different state universities situated in different provinces of Sri Lanka and human resource managers selected from different organizations. The authors made a choice to have a sample of one hundred and fifty respondents (n=150), with each category having 50 participants each based on simple random sampling.

Data collection method: in order to collect the research data, both library and field methods have been used. A questionnaire has been distributed via email for collecting the research data in order to confirm or reject the research hypotheses. Library method has been used for reviewing the research literature.

Reliability and validity: validity in research means the accuracy of the tools used to collect appropriate data to help in answering the research questions as unambiguously as possible. Below is how the validity and reliability of the present study were enhanced during the design of the research questionnaires:

- The questionnaires started with an introduction assuring the participants that their information would be confidential. This encouraged them to give truthful information that improved on the research validity due to the accuracy of their responses.
- No jargon terminologies were used in the design of the questions to avoid misinterpretations and inaccuracy of responses.
- The questions were shortened to avoid consuming a lot of time for the respondents. Long questionnaires make respondents to answer in a hurry even without understanding the questions. This would lead to inaccurate responses that would have affected the validity of the project.
- To enhance reliability, the researcher used the same set of questions for respondents in the same category.
- Most questions were Likert-scale type so that they could measure the same thing and hence boost the internal reliability.
- The researcher conducted a pilot study for the purposes of pre-testing the questionnaires. This helped to unfold any weakness that would have affected the validity and reliability of the research instrument.

Data analysis was conducted chronologically, starting with the analysis of the demographic compositions of the participants in the sample. Frequency tables and crosstabs were used for the demographic analysis. On the other hand, hypothesis-testing using the t-test and chi-square test were both used to either test the hypothesis or infer the results to the entire population of B.A graduates. Cross tabulations were also used here.

Data Analysis and Results

The average years spent before getting a formal job

H₀: The average time that most B.A graduates remain before getting a formal employment is equal to 5 years.

H_A: The average times that most B.A graduates remain before getting a formal employment is not equal to 5 years.

Table 2: The average years spent before getting a formal job t-test output

t-Test: Two-Sample Assuming Unequal Variances		
	<i>Years unemployed</i>	<i>Hypothesized Mean</i>
Mean	3.66	5
Variance	3.65755102	0
Observations	50	50
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
Df	49	
t Stat	-4.954440351	
P(T<=t) one-tail	4.52149E-06	
t Critical one-tail	1.676550893	
P(T<=t) two-tail	9.04298E-06	
t Critical two-tail	2.009575199	

Based on the outcomes of the analysis, the mean average number of years that B.A graduates remain without a formal job is 3.66 years. This is below the critical value of 5 years by 1.44 years and null hypothesis is rejected ($t = -4.9544$, $df = 49$, $p = 0.000 > 9.04298E-06$, two-tail).

It conclude that the observed difference is statistically significant at 95% confidence level, and that the average number of years B.A graduates spend without a formal job is actually less than 5 years.

Waiting time between males and females

H₀: There is no difference, between male and female B.A graduates, in the average number of years spent without a formal employment.

H_A: There is a difference, between male and female B.A graduates, in the average number of years spent without a formal employment.

Table 3: Waiting time between males and females t-test output

t-Test: Two-Sample Assuming Unequal Variances		
	Male	Female
Mean	3.8	3.45
Variance	3.337931034	4.260526316
Observations	30	20
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
Df	37	
t Stat	0.614611679	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.2712863	
t Critical one-tail	1.687093597	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.5425726	
t Critical two-tail	2.026192447	

Based on the outcomes of the analysis, male B.A graduates spend an average of 3.8 years before getting a formal job, whereas their female counterparts spend an average of 3.45 years. Males have an average higher than that of the females by 0.35 years. However, the null hypothesis is accepted ($t=0.6146$, $df=37$, $p=0.5425$, two-tail).

It conclude that the observed difference is not statistically significant at 95% confidence level, and hence not difference in the average number of years between male and female B.A graduates.

Gaps between universities and Employers

H_0 : There is no mean difference in B.A specific skills requirements (Soft skills, academic reputation, and practical skills) between the employers and institutions of higher learning.

H_A : There is a mean difference in B.A specific skills requirements (Soft skills, academic reputation, and practical skills) between the employers and institutions of higher learning.

Soft skills

Table 4: Oral and written communication skills, Numeracy skills, and Computer skills t-test outputs

Independent samples t-test 95% Confidence						
	Type of respondent	N	Mean	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Oral and written communication skills	Human Resource Manager	50	7.40	5.198	98	.000
	University Lecturer	50	4.96			
Numeracy skills	Human Resource Manager	50	7.12	6.637	98	.000
	University Lecturer	50	4.42			
Computer skills	Human Resource Manager	50	6.94	4.833	98	.000
	University Lecturer	50	4.94			

This represented a mean difference of 2.44(7.40 - 4.96) suggesting that oral and written communication skills are more important for employers than being for the university lecturers. The null hypothesis of no difference was rejected ($t=5.191$, $df=98$, $p=0.000$, two tail) meaning that the observed difference is statistically significant.

This represented a mean difference of 2.7 (7.12 -4.42) suggesting that numeracy skills are more important for employers than being for the university lecturers. The null hypothesis of no difference was rejected ($t=6.637$, $df =98$, $p=0.000$, two-tail) meaning that the observed difference is statistically significant.

This represented a mean difference of 2.0(6.94 -4.94) suggesting that computer skills are more important for employers than being for the university lecturers. The null hypothesis of no difference was rejected ($t=4.833$, $df =98$, $p=0.000$, two-tail) meaning that the observed difference is statistically significant.

Table 5: Time management and responsibility, Professionalism, and Problem-solving skills t-test outputs

Independent samples t-test 95% Confidence						
	Type of respondent	N	Mean	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Time management and responsibility	Human Resource Manager	50	7.24	6.016	98	.000
	University Lecturer	50	4.48			
Professionalism	Human Resource Manager	50	5.98	3.004	98	.000
	University Lecturer	50	4.60			
Problem-solving skills	Human Resource Manager	50	6.36	3.750	98	.000
	University Lecturer	50	4.74			

This represented a mean difference of 2.76(7.24 – 4.48) suggesting that time management and responsibilities are more important for employers than being for the university lecturers. The null hypothesis of no difference was rejected ($t=6.016$, $df =98$, $p=0.000$, two-tail) meaning that the observed difference is statistically significant.

This represented a mean difference of 1.38 (5.98 – 4.60) suggesting that professionalism is more important for employers than are for the university lecturers. The null hypothesis of no difference was rejected ($t=3.004$, $df= 98$, $p=0.000$, two-tail) meaning that the observed difference is statistically significant.

This represented a mean difference of 1.62 (6.36 – 4.74) suggesting that problem-solving skills are more important for employers than are for the university lecturers. The null hypothesis of no difference was rejected ($t=3.750$, $df =98$, $p=0.000$, two-tail) meaning that the observed difference is statistically significant.

Table 6: Graduates’, Ability to work in a team, and Interpersonal skills t-test outputs

Independent samples t-test 95% Confidence						
	Type of respondent	N	Mean	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Graduates' (eg. willingness to learn, take initiative etc)	Human Resource Manager	50	7.04	5.252	98	.000
	University Lecturer	50	4.70			
Ability to work in a team	Human Resource Manager	50	7.34	6.728	98	.004
	University Lecturer	50	4.80			
Interpersonal skills (cleanliness, manners, etc.)	Human Resource Manager	50	6.40	2.534	98	.013
	University Lecturer	50	5.16			

This represented a mean difference of 2.34 (7.04 – 4.7) suggesting that graduates' are more important for employers than are for the university lecturers. The null hypothesis of no difference was rejected (t=5.252, df =98, p=0.000, two-tail) meaning that the observed difference is statistically significant.

This represented a mean difference of 2.54 (7.34 – 4.8) suggesting that ability to work in a team is more important for employers than is for the university lecturers. The null hypothesis of no difference was rejected (t=6.728, df= 98, p=0.004, two-tail) meaning that the observed difference is statistically significant.

This represented a mean difference of 1.24 (6.4 - 5.16) suggesting that interpersonal skills are more important for employers than is for the university lecturers. The null hypothesis of no difference was rejected (t=2.534, df =98, p=0.013, two-tail) meaning that the observed difference is statistically significant.

Academic reputation

Table 7: Overqualified graduate and under qualified graduate t-test outputs

Independent samples t-test 95% Confidence						
	Type of respondent	N	mean	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Overqualified graduates get the job easily	Human Resource Manager	50	4.70	-7.709	98	.000
	University Lecturer	50	7.40			
Under-qualified graduates get the job easily	Human Resource Manager	50	3.78	-3.167	98	.002
	University Lecturer	50	5.44			

This represented a mean difference of -2.70 (4.7 -7.4) suggesting that over qualified graduates getting the job easily is less important for employers than is for the university lecturers. The null hypothesis of no difference was rejected (t=-7.709, df =98, p=0.000, two-tail) meaning that the observed difference is statistically significant.

This represented a mean difference of -1.66 (3.78 – 5.44) suggesting that under qualified graduates getting the job easily is less important for employers than is for the university

lecturers. The null hypothesis of no difference was rejected ($t=-3.167$, $df=98$, $p=0.002$, two-tail) meaning that the observed difference is statistically significant.

Practical skills

Table 8: Priority on Graduates with work experience and working on a voluntary basis t-test output

Independent samples t-test 95% Confidence						
	Type of respondent	N	Mean	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Priority on Graduates with work experience (e.g. industrial attachment and internship)	Human Resource Manager	50	5.46	-.172	98	.864
	University Lecturer	50	5.54			
Priority on graduates working on a voluntary basis	Human Resource Manager	50	4.22	.930	98	.355
	University Lecturer	50	3.76			

This represented a mean difference of -0.08 (5.46 -5.54) suggesting that work experience is more important for employers than is for the university lecturers. The null hypothesis of no difference was accepted ($t=-.172$, $df=98$, $p=0.864$, two-tail) meaning that the observed difference is not statistically significant.

This represented a mean difference of 0.46(4.22 -3.76) suggesting that working on a voluntary basis is more important for employers than is for the university lecturers. The null hypothesis of no difference was accepted ($t=0.930$, $df=98$, $p=0.355$, two-tail) meaning that the observed difference is not statistically significant.

University attended and graduates' employability

H₀: There is no mean difference between the university attended and the ability of the B.A graduates to secure a job?

H_A: There is a mean difference between the university attended and the ability of the B.A graduates to secure a job?

Based on the chi-square test, the results revealed that employability of B.A graduates from the University of Colombo range between 2 and 4 out of 10 cases from the lecturers' point of view. This represents between 20 to 40% of the total graduates. For Open University of Sri Lanka the range is between 10 and 50%, for University of Visual and Performing Arts between 10 and 40%, for University of Ruhuna between 20 and 30%, and for university of Peradeniya between 20 and 40%. The table below shows these summaries.

Table 9: University attended and graduates' employability crosses tabulations

		Are many of your B.A graduates employed				Total	
		About 25% are employed	About 50% are employed	About 75% are employed	Nearly 100% are employed		
university do you lecture	University of Colombo	Count	2	3	4	1	10
		% of Total	4.0%	6.0%	8.0%	2.0%	20.0%
	Open University of Sri Lanka	Count	1	0	5	4	10
		% of Total	2.0%	0.0%	10.0%	8.0%	20.0%
	University of Visual and Performing Arts	Count	2	1	3	4	10
		% of Total	4.0%	2.0%	6.0%	8.0%	20.0%
	University of Ruhuna	Count	2	3	3	2	10
		% of Total	4.0%	6.0%	6.0%	4.0%	20.0%
	University of Peradeniya	Count	2	2	4	2	10
		% of Total	4.0%	4.0%	8.0%	4.0%	20.0%
Total		Count	9	9	19	13	50
		% of Total	18.0%	18.0%	38.0%	26.0%	100.0%

The results above suggest a difference in employability of B.A graduates among the universities at which they studied. Since this could have happened due to chance of random variation, a chi-square analysis was conducted to authenticate the claim as shown in the table below.

Table 10: University attended and graduates' employability Chi-square output

Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	7.728 ^a	12	.806
Likelihood Ratio	9.497	12	.660
Linear-by-Linear Association	.082	1	.775
N of Valid Cases	50		

From the chi-square analysis, null hypothesis of no difference was accepted ($\chi^2=7.728$, $p=0.806$, $df = 12$, two-tail). Hence, the observed differences between the universities in terms of B.A graduates employability were merely due to chance of random variation and no statistically significant at 95% confidence level.

B.A skills requirements across different industries

H₀: There is no mean difference in B.A skills requirements (overall soft skills, overall academic reputation, and overall practical experience) across different industries.

H_A: There is a mean difference in B.A skills requirements (overall soft skills, overall academic reputation, and overall practical experience) across different industries.

For this analysis, the one way ANOVA was used as opposed to using multiple t-tests as a way of avoiding type 1 error (Wetcher-Hendricks, 2014). The results outputs for each variable across the different were as follows.

Table 11: B.A skills requirements across different industries ANOVA output

ANOVA						
		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Soft skills are very important	Between Groups	13.479	3	4.493	.638	.594
	Within Groups	323.801	46	7.039		
	Total	337.280	49			
Academic reputation is an important	Between Groups	16.438	3	5.479	.852	.473
	Within Groups	295.882	46	6.432		
	Total	312.320	49			
Practical experience is important	Between Groups	25.315	3	8.438	1.599	.202
	Within Groups	242.685	46	5.276		
	Total	268.000	49			

Based on the result outputs, the null hypotheses of no difference for soft skills ($F=0.638$, $p=0.594$, $df=49$), academic reputation ($F=0.852$, $p=0.473$, $df=49$), and practical experience ($F=1.599$, $p=0.202$, $df=49$) across different industries were accepted. Hence, B.A skills requirements do not vary across industries.

Years unemployed and necessity of higher education

H_0 : There is no relationship between numbers of years that B.A graduates remain unemployed and the overall perception that higher education is necessary in securing employment.

H_A : There is a relationship between numbers of years that B.A graduates remain unemployed and the overall perception that higher education is necessary in securing employment.

According to the results, the coefficient of determination was -0.30920 indicating a weak and negative correlation. Since R square was 0.264 , it means that 1 year without a job causes a graduates' perception that higher education is necessary for securing a job to decrease by 26.4% . These results are depicted below.

Table 12: Years unemployed and necessity of higher education regression statistics *Regression Statistics*

<i>Regression Statistics</i>	
Multiple R	0.513607197
R Square	0.263792353
Adjusted R Square	0.248454694
Standard Error	1.657955157
Observations	50

Since the above interpretations of the results could have possibly been influenced by the effect of random variation, or could have happened just due to chance, the null hypothesis was tested as shown in the table below.

Table 13: Years unemployed and necessity of higher education coefficient of regression outputs

ANOVA					
	<i>df</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Significance F</i>
Regression	1	47.27686	47.27686	17.1989	0.00013
Residual	48	131.9431	2.7488		
Total	49	179.22	1		

	<i>Coefficients</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>	<i>t Stat</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>Lower 95%</i>	<i>Upper 95%</i>
Intercept	5.29876	0.45948	11.532	0.94 E-15	4.37491	6.22261
Education is necessary	-0.30920	0.07455	4.1471	0.00013	-0.45910	-0.15929

Based on the results as shown in the table above, the null hypothesis of no difference was rejected ($p=0.00013$), and hence the observed relationship was statistically significant at 95% confidence level.

Employers’ perception on soft skills, academic reputation, and practical skills

H₀: There is no a mean difference in the overall importance that employers place on soft skills; academic reputation; and practical skills of B.A graduates.

H_A: There is mean difference in the overall importance that employers place for soft skills, academic reputation, and the practical skills of B.A graduates.

Table 14: Employers’ perception on soft skills, academic reputation, and practical skills Paired Samples Statistics.

Paired Samples Statistics					
		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Soft skills are very important	7.12	50	2.624	.371
	Academic reputation is an important	4.56	50	2.525	.357
Pair 2	Practical experience is important	7.40	50	2.339	.331
	Soft skills are very important	7.12	50	2.624	.371
Pair 3	Academic reputation is an important	4.56	50	2.525	.357
	Practical experience is important	7.40	50	2.339	.331

From the above table, it is explicit that overall soft skills had a mean response of 7.12, academic reputation 4.56, and practical experience 7.40 for the same group of participants (n=50). This means a mean difference of 2.56 between soft skills and academic reputation, 0.28 between

practical experience and soft skills, and 2.84 between academic reputation and practical experience. This tends to create the impression that employers attach the most importance on practical skills, followed by soft skills, and finally on the academic reputation. The question to instigate is whether these observations are statistically significant or not.

Table 15: Employers’ perception on soft skills, academic reputation, and practical skills t-test outputs

		Paired Samples Test					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Paired Differences							
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper				
Pair 1	Soft skills are very important - Academic reputation is an important Practical experience is	2.560	3.376	.477	1.601	3.519	5.363	49	.000
Pair 2	important - Soft skills are very important Academic reputation is an important - Practical experience is	.280	3.163	.447	-.619	1.179	.626	49	.534
Pair 3	important - Practical experience is important	-2.840	3.316	.469	-3.782	-1.898	-6.056	49	.000

Based on the output results in the table shown above;

the null hypothesis of no difference between soft skills and academic reputation is rejected (t=5.363, df 49, p= 0.000, two-tail).

the null hypothesis of no difference between practical experience and soft skills is accepted.(t=0.626, df 49, p=.534, two-tail);

the null hypothesis of no difference between academic reputation and practical experience is rejected. (t=-6.056, df 49, p=0.000, two-tail).

It conclude that the observed differences, or no difference, are statistically significant at 95% confidence level. Hence, there is a difference between academic reputation and practical experience and between soft skills and practical experience. There is no difference between soft skills and practical experience of B.A graduates.

Need for Universities to Liaise with Employers

H₀: There is no mean difference between employers and universities in the perception that institutions of higher learning should liaise with employers to absorb B.A fresh graduates.

H_A: There is a mean difference between employers and universities in the perception that institutions of higher learning should liaise with employers to absorb B.A fresh graduates.

Table 16: Need for Universities to Liaise with Employers Group statistics

Group Statistics					
	Type of respondent	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Institutions of higher learning should liaise with employers	Human Resource Manager	50	5.62	2.702	.382
	University Lecturer	50	4.32	1.622	.229

Based on the group output statics shown in the above table, the mean response for employers' category was 5.62, which is represented by the human resource managers, whereas that of the university lecturers' category was 4.32. This is imperative that there is a higher mean perception in the statement that universities should liaise with employers among HR managers or employers than among the university lecturers, with a mean difference of 1.3.

Table 17: Need for Universities to Liaise with Employers t test outputs

Independent Samples Test							
	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2tailed)	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
						Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	19.807	.000	2.917	98	.004	.416	2.184
Equal variances not assumed			2.917	80.247	.005	.413	2.187

Based on the output results in the table shown above, the null hypothesis of no difference is rejected ($t=2.917$, $df=98$, $p=0.004$, two-tail). It conclude that the observed difference is statistically significant at 95% confidence level, and hence there is a difference in the average perception that universities should liaise with employers to absorb fresh graduates between the employers and the university lecturers.

Employers' need to communicate their B.A skills expectations

H₀: There is no mean difference between employers and universities in the perception that employers should communicate their B.A skills expectations for institutions of higher learning to implement.

H_A: There is a mean difference between employers and universities in the perception that employers should communicate their B.A skills expectations for institutions of higher learning to implement.

Table 18: Employers' need to communicate their B.A skills expectations Group statistics

Group Statistics					
	Type of respondent	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Employers should communicate	Human Resource Manager	50	3.82	1.870	.264
	University Lecturer	50	5.80	3.136	.444

Based on the group output statics shown in the above table, the mean response for employers' category was 3.82 whereas that of the university lecturers' category was 5.80. This is imperative that there is higher mean perception that employers should communicate their skills requirement among university lecturers than among the human resources managers, with a mean difference of -1.98.

Table 19: Employers' need to communicate their B.A skills expectations t-test outputs

	Independent Samples Test						
	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
						Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	22.044	.000	-3.834	98	.000	-3.005	-.955
Equal variances not assumed			-3.834	79.934	.000	-3.008	-.952

Based on the output results in the table shown above, the null hypothesis of no difference is rejected ($t=-3.834$, $df= 98$, $p= 0.000$, two-tail). It conclude that the observed difference is statistically significant at 95% confidence level, and hence there is difference in the average perception that employers should communicate their skills requirements between the employers and the university lecturers.

Conclusions

This research concludes that there are gaps in Bachelor of Arts skills requirements between Sri Lanka state university outcome and the employers' expectations. These gaps are majorly on the soft skills of the graduates seeking for employment, which include the oral and written communication skills, numeracy skills, computer skills, time management and responsibilities, professionalism, problem-solving skills, and graduates' attitudes such as taking initiative and willingness to learn, graduates' ability to work in a team, and their interpersonal skills. Yet, Anderson et al. (2012) opined that institutions of higher learning have the responsibility of furnishing learners with industry-specific skills in their respective courses.

Additionally, having studied at a popular university for a Bachelor of Arts degree is not a determinant of whether one has better chances of securing employment than a person who studied in a less popular university. It is also important to conclude that the Bachelor of Arts skills requirement is invariant across employers in different industries because they portray

congruence about specific skills. However, this challenges findings by Mohamed and Shayeb (2013) and Tuyet (2014) that qualities for graduates' employability vary depending on profession, position, and the employer.

Universities and employers differ in their opinions regarding academic over qualification and under qualification with universities believing that both cases should be employable, but to the employers' rebuttal. Scurry & Blenkinsopp (2012), who found out that over qualification or under qualification of graduates were major reasons why some graduates remain unemployed, had echoed this observation in the literature review. This leads to the conclusion that as much as academic reputation is not exclusively a major influence in securing a job, on the other hand inadequate academic reputation is repulsive for the employers. Finch et al. (2013) in fact supported this observation in the literature review section that although academic reputation is an important factor that impacts on the employability in general, it is not strong enough in impacting on the employability of graduates.

There were also collaboration gaps between employers and the universities. Universities fail to liaise with employers to absorb fresh graduates, whereas on the other hand, employers fail to communicate their skills needs for the universities to implement. This is a two-way gap. In fact, this is in tandem with Andrews and Russell (2012) postulations in the literature review that employers are usually unwilling to communicate industry-specific skills that they want implemented by the universities. Also, Wilkins (2007) opined that it is the company's responsibility to train their employees in order to match the needs required by the organization.

Recommendations

The study found out that there is a gap in computer skills among Bachelor of Arts graduates. This skill can only be bridged if there is heavy investment in the education system in terms of computer labs and technicians. Hence, the Sri Lanka government should consider increasing the level of investments in higher education sector in order to bridge some of the gaps in Bachelor of Arts outcomes.

Since the study found out that there is a gap in the oral and numeracy skills of B.A graduates, it is recommended for institutions of higher learning and the government to invest in student workshops such as debate and math contests respectively in order to enhance numeracy skills and the oral and written communication skills (Ke & Grabowski, 2007; Kennedy, 2009). On the other hand, graduates' attributes such as taking initiative and ability to work in a team should be improved by engaging Bachelor of Arts students in joint assignments and group discussions more frequently (Smith, Wood, Adams, Wieman, Knight, Guild & Su, 2009). Additionally, Sri Lanka state universities should improve on time management skills by allocating marks for class attendance (Smith et al., 2009) This way, the students will be motivated to be punctual and never to skip class.

The research established a gap between universities and the employers. Hence, this research project recommends the government, universities, and the various organizations in Sri Lanka to consider investing in coming up with an annual forum where all the stakeholders meet to discuss and express their concerns. This way, then blames between universities and the employers would diminish, as the issues would be addressed in the general meeting of the forum.

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