

An assessment of Interests, Attitudes, and Future Aspirations of First Year Students of the Faculty of Arts, University of Colombo

Premarathne H.D.P

Masters Candidate, Faculty of Graduate Studies, University of Colombo

Faculty of Medicine, University Of Colombo

Kulasekara N.K

Postgraduate Diploma Candidate, Faculty of Graduate Studies, University of Colombo

English Language Teaching Unit, University of Colombo

Background and Justification

Sri Lankan society is now transforming into an aging population and the country is running out of time to harness the resource of 'youth'. The most important fact is that youth unemployment is much higher than unemployment among other groups in Sri Lanka. It is about 30% compared to unemployment of about 10% in other age groups (World Bank report 2008). Employment prospects of local arts undergraduates is an issue that continues to require the attention of all stakeholders. This study focuses on themes related to this broad issue.

In 1971, the Dudley Seers report (ILO) on Matching Education to Employment, argued that unemployment among the educated had partly resulted from their high aspirations on entering white-collar employment and a desire for academic education. Moreover, ILO report states that youth unemployment in Sri Lanka, being estimated at roughly 40% of the total amount of unemployment, has been recognized as a serious problem (ILO, 2004). The same results were highlighted in a study carried out in Sri Lanka that the graduate unemployment has loomed as a major problem facing the country during the last three decades. Due to this situation, results of non-availability of employment positions, as well as the desire to obtain employment in a certain sector or occupation, or heightened career aspirations are singly or in combination (Hettige et al, 2002).

Gunawardena's study (1991) showed that employers listed communication skills, personality, interpersonal skills and general transferable skills such as adaptability, decision-making and organizational skills which they lack as important requirements from university graduates (Gunawardana, et al, 1991). Some of the researches done in this field identified that the relationship between education and aspirations did not emerge straightforward and in the case of university graduates, specific mention is made of private business owners and managers who have difficulty in employing young graduates due to their low proficiency in English, inadequate practical experience and very often negative attitudes to youth and work (Hettige, et al, 2002 and Samaraweera, 2007).

Objectives

Students of Bachelor of Arts degree programme have different aspirations regarding their studies and job prospects. The primary objective of the research is to examine the basic factors that affect Arts graduates when seeking employment. Consideration has been given to both external

factors such as socio-economic dynamics and internal factors such as motivation and interests of the students.

This study was conducted to assess: The level of satisfaction of students on being Arts undergraduates; their job preferences and their attitudes on being an Arts graduate: Problems they face in getting decent employment as Arts graduates and how their future aspirations depended on factors such as number of attempts at A/Ls, intentions of seeking foreign/local employments, gender, their parents' education level etc. which were also examined.

Methodology

Students who entered the University of Colombo in 2011 to follow the BA degree programme were selected for the study (n=240). Study setting was the Faculty of Arts in the University of Colombo. The sample was selected randomly from the admission register. Data was gathered using a questionnaire and focus group discussions; 223 students responded to the survey while four focus group discussions representing all ethnic groups, gender and different socio-economic backgrounds of the student population was conducted during a three month period (January to March 2012) with their consent.

Results/Conclusion

Majority of the Arts faculty students are female (82%). Most of the parents of these students were A/L qualified (44%) and the monthly income of 77 % is below Rs 25,000. A significant association was found between gender and level of satisfaction in the Arts degree programme. Most of the female students were satisfied being Arts undergraduates. Among students, 65% were 'satisfied' regarding selection to the Arts degree programme and 18% was "highly satisfied". Majority of the students had entered the university at their first attempt.

According to the survey many Arts undergraduates aspire private as well as government employment. A significant minority of students was interested in getting foreign and private sector jobs. Significant associations between private and government jobs were also observed. There were 20% of students who desired to migrate for a job, which was seen mostly among male students.

There were many limitations expected by the students. As they have mentioned the Arts Degree has the lowest recognition in this country. They believe that they will get a lesser salary and lesser demand in the system of employment. Also the fact that they have no extra qualifications or professional training is seen as a major setback in job seeking. Most of all, the lack of language proficiency (Tamil and English) and IT skills will affect their chances of getting decent employment. Most of the Arts faculty students have negative attitudes regarding future prospects as they have limited soft and technical skills.

The students had suggested few modes of improving their prospects including awareness raising through career guidance programmes and internship programmes to improve their employability.

The research finding reveals that the students should be encouraged to have an open discussion about their study related issues and to map out their needs towards the future prospects. Student counselling, personality development programmes and mentoring programmes could be highly effective in helping these students achieve their aspirations.

There is a need for a system to carry out some psychosocial interventions to minimize academic related problems and to meet personal needs during academic life. It is important changing

attitudes towards employments among university students in other sectors while encouraging them to acquire the necessary technical skills, soft skills and language proficiency. This would be a great help in minimizing under employment and unemployment among Arts graduates in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Undergraduate, interest, attitudes, aspiration, employment

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