

# CAREER DEVELOPMENT- A KNOWLEDGE BASED ECONOMY FOR EMPLOYABILITY: FROM THE PERSPECTIVES SOUTH EASTERN UNIVERSITY OF SRI LANKA

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## **ABSTRACT**

*University graduates are facing strong competition for top jobs within the country as well as in overseas. Therefore they have to prepare and develop their careers well before they start seeking for jobs as early as their freshmen year at university. For a country like Sri Lanka which has the vision "To be the miracle of Asia" it is very important to identify the gaps of 'KSA' of the younger generation of the country because ultimately they are the future of the nation. The concept of career development is being considered important and being discussed very much than ever before. It is indeed much more important to focus on career development today because unlike earlier, the environmental changes are rapid and thus, it is important to develop more flexible and competent graduates in a country to make its future a bright one. Though many of us don't pay much attention on the importance of the career development it is indeed important and plays a major role in deciding an individual's future. Of an individual's perspective it is very important in order to identify his or her potential, interests, and capabilities in order to find out what should be improved. Thus, the aim of this article is to highlight the importance of career development and identifying the employability skills that influence a person's career development of undergraduates in Sri Lanka. This exploratory study uses a semi-structured, face-to-face interview with 210 undergraduates and 72 graduates passed out from South Eastern*

*University of Sri Lanka based on the simple random sampling method. Based on the findings, the skills for employability and career development revealed by both undergraduates and graduates the Language competency is the most important skill with a contribution of 62% for career development, while team work, communication, positive attitude and practical skills contribute 39%, 35%, 34%, and 33% respectively. The research skills, problem solving skills, initiative and adoptability skills also makes some useful contributions. This study will be a useful output for the entire society, specially the youths to succeed and meet the future requirements in any market, especially in a developing country like Sri Lanka. Universities do play a key role in developing individual characteristics, which is a dominant factor that affects an individual's career development. Focusing more in language, communication and team working skills are important because it will be a big challenge in the future in crating globally employable graduates. Finally, whatever the barriers we may have, ourselves are the biggest barrier for the development of our career because of the attitudes and thoughts that we form regarding our own knowledge skills and abilities. So it is imperative to develop the competencies of undergraduates with the intention of making them employable in any market around the world.*

**Key Words:** *Career development, employability skills, graduates, undergraduates.*

## **Introduction**

We all have a general idea of what career development is, and the fact is that we don't widely pay attention to these types of topics thinking that it will not have much impact on our lives. Before we move further, let us know what is really meant by Career Development. "Career development is an ongoing process that occurs over the lifespan and includes home, school and community experiences related to an individual's self-concept and its implementation in lifestyle as one lives life and makes a living." Pietrofesa & Splete (1975), As in "Career Development Challenges for the 21st century work place" by Conlon J Thomas, (2004). Career development is indeed a lifelong learning process or a learning curve which is not just a matter of one or two days. So, it can be called as a continuous process.

Having introduced career development, it is very important to know for what reasons is it so important and what are the key factors that drive, in a person choosing his or her career. According to an article written by Budhathoki K Dhruba in 2004 on "Human Resource Management: Career Development" in which he states that "PEOPLE ARE THE SOURCES of all productive effort in organizations. Organizational effectiveness depends on the performance of people working in organizations".

People are the main resource who drives the organization towards success. The HR's success in any organization would mean the successfulness of the entire organization. For a country like Sri Lanka which has the vision "TO BE THE MIRACLE OF ASIA" it is very important to identify the gaps of 'KSA' of the younger generation of the country because ultimately they are the future of the nation. Of an individual's perspective it is very important in order to identify his or her potential, interests, and capabilities in order to find out what should be improved. Thus, the aim of this article is to highlight the importance of employability skills

for career development of university graduates which is the need of an hour.

## **Literature Review**

There are many researchers that have been conducted on various related topics. The previous studies are focused in every aspect of career development. Especially, the employee and employer expectations, the factors that influence a person's choice of career path and so on.

The term "Knowledge based economy" results from a fuller recognition of the role of knowledge and technology in economic growth. Knowledge as embodied in human beings (as human capital) and in technology has always been central to economic development. A paper by Jeffery H Gary et al. in 1992 on the topic "Empowering Rural Parents to Support Youth Career Development" reveals that the rural situation presents unique challenges to the career decision making process of young people. Unlike their urban counterparts, youth in rural and remote areas generally have to leave home to attend postsecondary school and more often than not, have to leave home to partake in any type of training which would put them on a career path. Rural parents are faced with difficulties that are somewhat different than urban parents. One of the major factors for rural parents is the financial cost of sending their children to urban centers to pursue their career goals. If we consider another research which was conducted by Shafie.L.A and Nayan S. in 2010 on "Employability Awareness among Malaysian Undergraduates" This research was conducted among 61 students of Diploma in Science at a local university in Malaysia. 40 of them were female students and 21 were male students. The sample was selected from the list of registered final semester students of Diploma in Science. Based on the finding, the participants chose Personal attributes as the most important employability skill. Personal attributes include loyalty, commitment, honesty, integrity, enthusiasm, reliability, personal presentation, common sense, positive self-esteem, and a sense of humor, motivation, adaptability, a balanced

attitude to work and home life and ability to deal with pressure. This was indicated by the participants as personal attributes encompassed 25 % of employability skills. The second important employability skill was Team work at 17 %. Team work included working as an individual and a member of a team, coaching and mentoring. This might be caused by the participants' observations that workplace tasks usually require team work and collaborative tasks through classroom learning activities. The third important employability skill is Self-Management at 15 %. Self -management included having personal vision and goals, evaluating own performance, taking responsibility and articulate own ideas and vision. The fourth important employability skill was Communication at 10 %. Learning was categorized as the fifth important employability skill at 8% which included managing their own learning, being open to new ideas, contributing to their learning community. Initiative and enterprise was the sixth important employability skill at 7 %. It was interesting to note that Technology, Planning and Organizing and Problem Solving were given equal importance at 6 % as the three least important employability skills.

On his paper "Career Choice Factors of High School Students" Borchert.T.M (2002) found what the most preferable occupations were, he reveals that based on his research Germantown High School students made multiple references to 'teachers, nurses, and marketing career choices. This reflects the interest that is present in high school students in the coming years. There many professionals in those areas now, as well as a need for many teachers, nurse, and business majors in the future. I am amazed at the variety of professions listed. Of the seventy-eight respondents there were over fifty different professions. The fact that students listed a large variety of professions, leads the researcher to believe that students are exploring career choices. Where else would the diversity come from? Students have also stated very specifically the area within some career choices. This also leads the researcher to believe that unless

students were asking questions and taking an interest in the career choice process, the answers would be more superficial.

In addition there are so many other factors that researchers have considered; the future challenges are one of them which are also important. Overall, the literature provides us with great evidence of that career development is indeed important.

## **Research Methodology**

This research was conducted among 210 undergraduates from all faculties and 72 graduates of the south Eastern university of Sri Lanka, based on simple random sampling method. Nature of study was using exploratory, using a semi-structured face-to-face interview. Also this study is qualitative using case study

## **Results and findings**

According to our findings we would like to discuss some of the key things that we found out through our semi structured interviews with some undergraduates as well as some passed out graduates of our university. Many graduates and undergraduates stated different views about how the university has contributed to their career success through the subjects in the curriculum, workshops, short term courses such as translation, sports education, career guidance and counseling and extracurricular activities such as cultural shows, sports festivals.

According to one respondent a 3rd year student of the faculty of Management and Commerce it is really good to have such programmes in which she acquired a lot of skills which she did not have prior to entering the university and she thinks that student should be given the opportunity to organize such programmes and all the students should take part in those programmes. Another respondent- a 3rd year student of the faculty of Management and Commerce states that the university has given the motivation and it is really a booster because the chances have been created and the university

is always concerned about the students and he thinks that the participation of all the students to these programmes should be made compulsory.

A 3<sup>rd</sup> year student of the faculty of Islamic Studies and Arabic Language says that his ambition is to become a lecturer and he lacked various skills prior to entering the university and such programmes helped him to develop his personality, attitude. Further he says that he want to learn, teach, do research's and to spread the research's. He thinks the good things should be continued and maintained, while another respondent- a 2nd year student of the faculty of management and commerce says she was a very shy and a less interactive character and now the fear and the tension is derived out from her through participating in such events that is conducted by the university. Her view is the number of programmes that are organized should increase in order to make students more interactive. Many other students also gave similar views.

Discussing on some specific barriers that students think which are blocking the development of their careers almost 90% of the respondents say or think that it is the language and the communication skills is the main barriers which should be improved.

Discussion with some graduates also was very useful where they also shared different views. One respondent who specialized in Accounting and who is now a lecturer and worked in Rainco (Pvt) Ltd states that, entering the university enabled to improve his English and the 1 year industrial exposure at Rainco was the key where he moved to metropolitan areas and followed professional courses, then got a permanent job at Rainco. He says that communication skills are most important for career development.

According to another passed out student who specialized in Marketing and is a senior lecturer in Marketing, the base was the curriculum and the specialization program in Colombo gave him a learning opportunity. Again it was the one year training at Nestle Lanka ltd which gave the opportunity to learn more practical knowledge

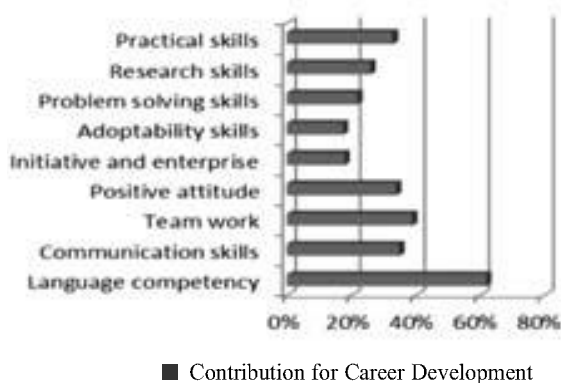
and skills and after being an academic it gave more opportunity to interact with local and foreign scholars. He says that it helped to develop his career though it was challenging. Another one who completed his degree in commerce and now the owner of Private Company states that the curriculum included an entrepreneurship course unit which induced him to start his own business. Creativity, innovation and initiative were the skills that turned his life as an entrepreneur. One recent passed out graduate who specialized in Accounting, who is working at Uniliver, Sri Lanka, says that research skills were the base while another respondent who is a lecturer who specialized in Islamic Finance says since Islamic Finance was newly introduced, visiting lectures from various industries were invited where he got industry exposure and several links, and worked as a trainee for 03 months at ADIL Capital (Pvt) Ltd. Another respondent who is also a lecturer who specialized in Management Information Systems (MIS) says that it was again the curriculum and the industrial exposure that helped him to develop his career. One graduate who is now an accountant in Dubai says that his family members supported him to get this job while the degree and other skills also helped to develop his career, while another one who is now working in Qatar as an accountant says it was his environment that created him chances to learn some professional courses since he was from Colombo, while the accounting special degree also assisted in developing his career.

When we compare with the current undergraduates with the graduates of the South Eastern University, there is a clear difference where the graduates feel it was the curriculum and the industrial exposure that helped them develop their career.

Based on the findings, the skills for employability and career development revealed by both undergraduates and graduates the Language competency is the most important skill with a contribution of 62% for career development, while team work, communication, positive attitude and practical skills contribute

39%, 35%, 34%, and 33% respectively. The research skills, problem solving skills, initiative and adoptability skills also makes some useful contributions.

### Contribution for Career Development



These skills are gained mainly by the university, through sound curriculum, internship training and special programmes on soft skills development, which are conducted by career guidance and welfare units.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

In any country, the university students or undergraduates as commonly known, are being termed or called as ‘The Cream of The Society’ because the society values them so much. If we just think for a moment WHY ALL THESE? If we are brave enough it should be easily understood that the society or the community expects something from us that of which can be some valuable contribution to the society. Having discussed some real factors of what our university does to develop the career and how some of our passed out graduates and undergraduates feel about that, we should like to conclude stating that universities do play a key role in developing individual characteristics, which is a dominant factor that affect an individual’s career development. Focusing more in language, communication and team working skills are important because it will be a big challenge in the future in creating globally employable graduates. Finally, whatever the

barriers we may have, ourselves are the biggest barrier for the development of our career because of the attitudes and thoughts that we form regarding our own knowledge skills and abilities.

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