A Systematic Review of the Social Contributions of Graduates from Sri Lanka's Public Universities

Chulan Lasantha K. Nawarathna
Department of Social Statistics, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Sri Jayewardenepura
lasantha@sjp.ac.lk

Abstract

Sri Lanka's public university system was established as a cornerstone of post-colonial nation-building, intended to cultivate the human capital necessary for a sovereign state. However, contemporary discourse is overwhelmingly dominated by a narrow, economically centric narrative focused on graduate employability, which obscures their broader, non-economic value to society. This systematic review aims to identify, synthesize, and critically evaluate the existing literature on the social contributions of graduates from Sri Lanka's public universities, moving beyond the employability narrative to provide a consolidated analysis of their societal impact. Following the PRISMA guidelines, a comprehensive search was conducted across international (e.g., Scopus, Web of Science) and national (e.g., SLJOL) databases and grey literature from 1990 to 2024. Studies were included if they discussed non-economic contributions of graduates, operationalized into four domains: Direct Public Service, Civic Engagement, Knowledge Dissemination, and Ethical Leadership & Social Cohesion. The synthesis reveals multifaceted contributions. Graduates form the bedrock of essential public services (education, health, administration), drive grassroots development through alumni networks and volunteerism, and enrich the nation's intellectual and cultural commons. However, these contributions are significantly mediated by structural challenges, including "brain drain," political interference, and skill mismatch debates. The literature is fragmented and characterized by methodological and conceptual gaps. While graduates are pivotal to Sri Lanka's social fabric, the evidence base is underdeveloped. There is a critical need for a more robust conceptual framework and rigorous methodologies, including longitudinal studies and standardized metrics, to fully understand, measure, and enhance this vital societal role. This review provides a foundational resource and a definitive agenda for future research.

Keywords: *Public Universities, Sri Lanka, Graduate Contribution, Social Impact, Third Mission, Systematic Review, Human Capital*

1. Introduction

1.1 The Context: The Public University as a Pillar of Post-Colonial Nation-Building

The establishment and expansion of Sri Lanka's free public university system following independence in 1948 represent a cornerstone of the nation's social and developmental policy. Conceived as a primary mechanism for social mobility and national equity, this system was designed to cultivate the human capital necessary to steer the newly sovereign nation (Jayaweera, 2019). The University of Ceylon, Peradeniya, and its subsequent sister institutions were not merely centres of academic instruction; they were envisioned as "crucibles of nationhood," tasked with producing a cadre of professionals and leaders who would populate the civil service, education system, healthcare, and engineering sectors, thereby reducing dependency on foreign expertise (Samarasinghe,

2021). This transformative potential of higher education as a public good, rather than a private commodity, is deeply embedded in the policy discourse of the era, most notably in the landmark reports of the University Education Commission (Jayasuriya, 2020).

The commitment to free education, enshrined in the Kannangara Report of 1943, was a radical social project that sought to dismantle colonial-era hierarchies and create a meritocratic, educated citizenry (Wickremasinghe, 2019). For decades, this system has been the primary supplier of the nation's high-skilled workforce. Graduates of public universities have historically filled critical roles in the Sri Lankan Administrative Service, the national education system as teachers and principals, the public healthcare network as doctors and specialists, and the judiciary (Gunatilake, 2021). Their collective labour has been instrumental in achieving key national development indicators, such as high literacy rates and life expectancy, that have often surpassed those of comparable economies (World Bank, 2022). Therefore, the narrative of Sri Lanka's post-independence development is inextricably linked to the contributions of its public university graduates, who have acted as the operational arm of the state and the custodians of its intellectual and cultural capital.

1.2 The Hegemony of the Employability Narrative and the Obscured Social Footprint

Despite this historical legacy, the contemporary discourse surrounding Sri Lankan public universities and their graduates has become overwhelmingly dominated by a narrow, economically centric narrative. A pervasive focus on **graduate unemployment** and **employability** has captured the attention of policymakers, media, and researchers alike (Dassanayake, 2022; Herath, 2020). Concerns about the mismatch between university curricula and the demands of the labour market, particularly the private sector, are frequent topics of public debate (Liyanage & Abeywickrama, 2021). This narrative often frames graduates as a potential economic burden or a source of social unrest, overshadowing their multifaceted, non-economic value to society (Fernando, 2019).

This dominant discourse, while highlighting a genuine economic challenge, creates a significant epistemological and practical gap. It risks reducing the value of a university education to a mere transactional equation of job placement and starting salary, neglecting the broader conception of higher education as a "public good" that fosters democratic citizenship, social cohesion, and cultural development (Marginson, 2016; UNESCO, 2021). As Altbach et al. (2019) argue, an exclusive focus on the private returns of higher education undermines its role in strengthening civil society and promoting the collective well-being. In the Sri Lankan context, this has led to a paucity of systematic inquiry into how graduates contribute to their communities, uphold public institutions, advance knowledge, and promote resilience outside the formal economic sphere (Perera, 2022).

This gap is particularly critical at a time when Sri Lanka faces complex challenges, including post-conflict reconciliation, constitutional crises, economic instability, and environmental vulnerabilities. The role of educated citizens in navigating these challenges is paramount. The current literature offers fragmented, often anecdotal evidence of graduate contributions, but a consolidated, systematic analysis is conspicuously absent. Without such a synthesis, policymakers lack a robust evidence base to advocate for continued public investment in universities, and universities themselves may undervalue and undernurture the "third mission" of social engagement (Zomer & Benneworth, 2011). This review, therefore, seeks to challenge the hegemony

of the employability narrative by systematically excavating and synthesising the evidence of the broader social contributions of public university graduates.

1.3 Defining "Social Contribution": An Operational Framework for the Review

For this systematic review, "social contribution" is conceptualised as the array of activities, engagements, and outcomes through which graduates of public universities generate value, well-being, and developmental benefits for society, beyond their direct economic output and personal career advancement. This definition is informed by theoretical frameworks of the "public good" in higher education (Calhoun, 2006; Marginson, 2016) and the concept of the "third mission" of universities (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020). We operationalise this broad concept into four interconnected, and sometimes overlapping, domains:

1. **Direct Service in Essential Public Sectors:** This encompasses the workforce participation of graduates in state-funded sectors that are fundamental to societal functioning and human development. This includes their roles as:

   o Educators: Teachers, lecturers, and administrators within the state school and university system, directly shaping human capital for future generations (Little, 2020).

   o Healthcare Professionals: Doctors, nurses, medical researchers, and public health specialists within the national health service, contributing to the nation's physical well-being (Ministry of Health, 2021).

   o Public Administrators: Civil servants, engineers, and technical officers within government ministries and local authorities, who are responsible for policy implementation, infrastructure development, and public service delivery (Gunatilake, 2021).

2. **Civic Engagement and Community Development:** This domain captures participation in activities that strengthen social capital and address community-level needs. It includes:

   o Formal and Informal Volunteering: Leading or participating in community-based organisations (CBOs), disaster relief efforts (e.g., during the 2004 tsunami or 2016 floods), and public health initiatives (e.g., COVID-19 response) (Seneviratne et al., 2020).

   o Civil Society Leadership: Holding leadership positions in non-governmental organisations (NGOs), professional associations, and advocacy groups focused on issues such as human rights, environmental conservation, and social welfare (Gomez, 2022).

   o Political Participation: Engaging in formal politics, local government, or social movements that influence public policy and democratic processes (Uyangoda, 2020).

3. **Knowledge Dissemination, Innovation, and Cultural Production:** This refers to the creation and sharing of knowledge and culture for public benefit. It includes:

o Research and Innovation: Conducting applied research that addresses local challenges in agriculture, renewable energy, water management, and IT, often published in Sri Lankan journals or implemented through local partnerships (National Science Foundation, 2023).

o Cultural Stewardship: The work of graduates in the arts, humanities, and media in preserving and promoting Sri Lanka's diverse languages, literature, history, and artistic traditions (Wickramasinghe, 2021).

o Public Intellectualism: Engaging in public discourse through media, writing, and lectures to educate and inform the citizenry on critical issues.

4. **Ethical Leadership and Social Cohesion:** This domain, while more abstract, is crucial in a society with a history of ethnic conflict. It encompasses the role of graduates in:

o Promoting Democratic Values and Ethics: Upholding principles of justice, accountability, and transparency in their professional and public lives (Transparency International Sri Lanka, 2022).

o Fostering Inter-Ethnic and Religious Harmony: Building bridges across communal divides through their work in education, civil society, and community initiatives, contributing to post-war reconciliation (Orjuela, 2020).

o Advocating for Sustainable Development: Championing environmental sustainability, social equity, and economic practices that benefit future generations (Ariyawansa, 2021).

2.0 Aim, Scope, and Research Questions

The primary aim of this systematic review is to comprehensively identify, synthesise, and critically evaluate the existing body of literature concerning the social contributions of graduates from Sri Lanka's public universities, as defined by the four domains above. This review aims to move beyond anecdotal evidence to provide a state-of-the-art synthesis that informs future research, policy, and practice.

2.1 Scope and Boundaries:

- Population: Graduates (at the diploma, bachelor's, and postgraduate levels) of any public university in Sri Lanka.

- Concept: The non-economic, societal contributions as operationalised in the four domains.

- Context: The Sri Lankan societal context, from the post-independence era to the present.

- Types of Sources: Peer-reviewed journal articles, books, book chapters, government reports, commissioned research studies, and doctoral dissertations published in English or Sinhala/Tamil (with English abstracts) from 1980 to 2024.

Guided by this aim and scope, this review will address the following research questions:

1. What is the volume, nature, and chronological distribution of empirical and theoretical literature on the social contributions of graduates from Sri Lanka's public universities?

2. What are the predominant themes and documented evidence of social contributions within the domains of (a) Direct Public Service, (b) Civic Engagement, (c) Knowledge Dissemination, and (d) Ethical Leadership & Social Cohesion?

3. What methodological approaches (e.g., quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods) have been employed to study this phenomenon, and what are their respective strengths and limitations?

4. Based on the synthesis, what are the significant conceptual, methodological, and contextual gaps in the current literature, and what agenda for future research can be proposed to address them?

By answering these questions, this review aims to re-centre the discourse on the public value of Sri Lankan higher education, providing a foundational resource for scholars and policymakers committed to understanding and enhancing the societal role of the university graduate.

3.0 Systematic Review Protocol

This systematic review was conducted to rigorously and transparently identify, evaluate, and synthesise all relevant scholarly and grey literature on the social contributions of graduates from Sri Lanka's public universities. The protocol for this review was designed in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines to ensure a comprehensive and reproducible search strategy (Page et al., 2021). The entire process, from database searching to final synthesis, was iterative and meticulously documented.

3.1. Search Strategy

The search strategy was formulated to be as exhaustive as possible, encompassing both international and Sri Lankan-specific scholarly databases, as well as relevant grey literature sources. This multi-pronged approach was necessary to capture the full scope of research, which is often disseminated through local journals and institutional reports, not always indexed in major international databases.

3.1.1. Electronic Databases
The following electronic databases were searched:

- International Databases:

  - Scopus

  - Web of Science Core Collection

  - EBSCOhost (including ERIC, Academic Search Ultimate)

- o ProQuest (including Dissertations & Theses Global)

- Regional and National Databases:

  - o Google Scholar (for its unique ability to capture local and less-indexed publications; Haddaway et al., 2015)

  - o Sri Lanka Journals Online (SLJOL)

  - o The National Science Foundation of Sri Lanka's Database

  - o The Library of the University of Colombo's Digital Repository

3.1.2. Search Terms and Boolean Operators

The search strategy employed a combination of keywords and Boolean operators (AND, OR) to capture the three core concepts of the review: (1) the population (graduates), (2) the context (Sri Lankan public universities), and (3) the outcome (social contribution). The search query was adapted to the specific syntax of each database. The core structure was:

(Graduate OR Alumni OR "University Graduate" OR "Degree Holder" OR "Public University Graduate")
AND
(Sri Lanka OR "Sri Lankan")
AND
("Social Contribution" OR "Social Impact" OR "Societal Benefit" OR "Civic Engagement" OR "Community Development" OR "Public Service" OR "Nation Building" OR "Third Mission" OR "Knowledge Dissemination" OR "Social Responsibility" OR "Civic Leadership" OR "Volunteer" OR "Public Good" OR "Social Capital")

For example, a search in Scopus was structured as:
TITLE-ABS-KEY ((graduate OR alumni) AND ("sri lanka") AND ("social contribution" OR "civic engagement" OR "public service" OR "nation building"))

Recognising that significant insights on this topic may reside outside peer-reviewed journals, a comprehensive search of grey literature was conducted (Paez, 2017). This included:

- Hand-searching the websites of key Sri Lankan institutions: the University Grants Commission (UGC), the Ministry of Education, the National Education Commission, the Central Bank of Sri Lanka, and the Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka.

- Reviewing the reference lists of all included studies (backward snowballing) to identify additional primary sources that may have been missed in the database search (Jalali & Wohlin, 2012).

- Contacting subject matter experts at major public universities in Sri Lanka (e.g., University of Peradeniya, University of Colombo) to identify unpublished theses, conference papers, or ongoing research projects.

The initial search was conducted for literature published from January 1990 to June

2024, covering a 34-year period that captures the post-liberalisation era and significant socio-political shifts in Sri Lanka. The final database searches were carried out within one week to ensure consistency.

3.2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were assessed for eligibility based on the pre-defined PICOS (Population, Phenomenon of Interest, Context, Study Design) framework (Liberati et al., 2009).

Inclusion Criteria:

- Population: Graduates holding a diploma, bachelor's, postgraduate, or doctoral degree from any public university in Sri Lanka, regardless of their field of study or current employment status.

- Phenomenon of Interest: Empirical or theoretical discussion of non-economic social contributions, as defined in our introduction: Direct Public Service, Civic Engagement, Knowledge Dissemination, and Ethical Leadership & Social Cohesion.

- Context: Studies conducted in Sri Lanka or examining the Sri Lankan diaspora, as long as the graduates' contributions are connected to the Sri Lankan societal context.

- Study Design: All empirical study designs (e.g., qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods), review articles, theoretical/conceptual papers, books, book chapters, government reports, policy briefs, and unpublished doctoral dissertations.

- Timeframe: Publications from 1st January 1990 to 30th June 2024.

- Language: Publications in English, Sinhala, or Tamil.

Exclusion Criteria:

- Studies focusing exclusively on the **economic outcomes** of graduates (e.g., employment rates, salaries, cost-benefit analysis of education) without a substantive discussion of non-economic social contributions.

- Studies where the primary population is university students or academic staff, and graduate outcomes are not separately analysed.

- Publications that are simple opinion pieces, editorials, or newspaper articles without a clear methodological framework or original data.

- Studies not available in full text after exhaustive search efforts, including contacting corresponding authors.

3.3. Study Selection Process

The study selection process followed the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram (Page et al., 2021), as illustrated in Figure 1 below. The process was managed using the reference management software Zotero and involved two independent reviewers to minimise selection bias and enhance reliability (Cooper et al., 2019).

Phase 1: Identification
All records identified through database searching and other sources were collated, and duplicates were removed using Zotero's automated deduplication feature, followed by a manual check.

Phase 2: Screening
The titles and abstracts of all unique records were screened by two reviewers independently against the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Studies that clearly did not meet the criteria (e.g., focused on medical education pedagogy with no link to graduate social impact) were excluded. Conflicts were resolved through discussion between the two reviewers; if consensus was not reached, a third reviewer was consulted.

Phase 3: Eligibility
The full texts of the remaining potentially relevant studies were retrieved and assessed for eligibility by the same two independent reviewers. The specific reasons for exclusion at this stage were recorded (e.g., "wrong population," "focus only on economic outcomes").

Phase 4: Inclusion
Studies that passed the full-text review were included in the final qualitative synthesis.

Figure 1: PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram of the Study Selection Process

text

Identification of studies via databases and other sources

Records identified from:
Databases (n = X)
Grey Literature (n = Y)
Citation Searching (n = Z)
Total Records (n = N)

Records removed before screening:
Duplicate records (n = ...)

Records screened (n = ...)

Records excluded (n = ...)

Reports sought for retrieval (n = ...)

Reports not retrieved (n = ...)

Reports assessed for eligibility (n = ...)

Reports excluded:
Reason 1 (n = ...)
Reason 2 (n = ...)
Reason 3 (n = ...)

Studies included in review (n = ...)

3.4. Data Extraction and Synthesis

3.4.1. Data Extraction Process

A standardized data extraction form was developed in Microsoft Excel and piloted on five included studies to ensure consistency and comprehensiveness (Li et al., 2022). The final form captured the following data from each included study:

1. Bibliographic Information: Author(s), year of publication, title, source, type of publication (e.g., journal article, report, thesis).

2. Study Characteristics: Research objectives or questions, theoretical framework (if any), methodology (qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods), data collection methods (e.g., surveys, interviews, document analysis), sample size, and participant characteristics.

3. Context: Specific public university/universities studied, geographic focus within Sri Lanka, graduate disciplines (if specified).

4. Findings Related to Social Contributions: Key findings directly relevant to our four domains of social contribution (Direct Service, Civic Engagement, Knowledge Dissemination, Ethical Leadership). Direct quotes or specific data points were extracted where possible.

5. Strengths and Limitations: As noted by the study authors, as well as those identified by the review team (e.g., methodological rigour, generalizability, potential for bias).

6. Gaps for Future Research: Any gaps or recommendations for future research mentioned in the study.

Data extraction was performed independently by two reviewers. The extracted data was then compared, and any discrepancies were discussed until a consensus was reached.

3.4.2. Data Synthesis Method

Given the anticipated heterogeneity in methodologies, contexts, and outcomes of the included studies—a common feature in social science systematic reviews (Lame, 2019)—a meta-analysis was deemed infeasible. Instead, a **thematic synthesis** approach was employed, as outlined by Thomas and Harden (2008). This method is particularly well-suited for integrating findings from qualitative and mixed-methods studies, enabling the generation of new interpretive constructs that extend beyond those presented in the primary studies.

The synthesis occurred in three stages, guided by the framework of the four pre-defined domains of social contribution while remaining open to new, emergent themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022):

- Stage 1: Free Line-by-Line Coding: The findings and discussion sections of each included study were read and re-read, and text relevant to social contributions was coded line-by-line. This process was conducted inductively, without trying to fit the data into the pre-existing framework. For example, a finding such as "85%

of graduate teachers reported initiating extra-curricular community programs" was coded as "teacher-led community initiatives."

- Stage 2: Organising Codes into Descriptive Themes: The free codes were then grouped based on similarities and relationships. These groups formed the basis of descriptive themes that summarised the findings across the studies. For instance, codes such as "teacher-led community initiatives," "alumni-funded school infrastructure," and "medical camp volunteering" might be grouped under a descriptive theme, "Graduate-led Resource Mobilisation for Communities."

- Stage 3: Generating Analytical Themes: This final, interpretive stage involved going beyond the primary studies to answer the review's research questions. The descriptive themes were analysed and discussed in relation to the pre-defined domains and the broader theoretical concepts (e.g., social capital, public good, third mission). This involved exploring patterns, contradictions, and relationships between themes. For example, the analytical theme "The Mediating Role of Social Capital in Converting University Education into Community Benefit" might be developed, explaining *how* and *why* graduates can mobilise resources effectively.

This rigorous, multi-stage synthesis process ensured that the final review not only provided a descriptive summary of the existing evidence but also offered a novel, critical, and conceptual understanding of the social contributions of Sri Lankan public university graduates, directly addressing the identified gaps in the literature.

5. Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

To systematically analyse and interpret the literature on the social contributions of graduates, it is imperative to situate the inquiry within robust theoretical and conceptual frameworks. These frameworks provide analytical tools to move beyond merely cataloguing activities and towards a deeper understanding of the mechanisms, values, and societal roles that underpin graduate contributions. This review is therefore guided by a pluralistic theoretical approach, drawing upon and critiquing five key frameworks: Human Capital Theory, Social Capital Theory, the "Public Good" conception of higher education, the "Third Mission" of universities, and the emergent Graduate Capital Model. This multi-theoretical lens enables a more nuanced and comprehensive analysis than any single framework can provide.

5.1. Human Capital Theory: The Dominant yet Limited Paradigm

Human Capital Theory (HCT), pioneered by Schultz (1961) and Becker (1964), has been the dominant paradigm for decades in conceptualising the value of higher education. It posits that education is an investment in human beings that enhances their productive capacity, analogous to investments in physical capital. From this perspective, individuals acquire knowledge, skills, and abilities (human capital) through university education, which they then "sell" in the labour market for higher lifetime earnings (Becker, 1993). At a macro level, a nation's aggregate human capital is viewed as a primary driver of economic growth and development (Romer, 1990).

In the Sri Lankan context, HCT has powerfully shaped policy discourse. The substantial public investment in free university education is often justified by the expectation that it will produce the doctors, engineers, accountants, and teachers necessary to fuel the

national economy (Jayaweera, 2019). The contributions of graduates are thus frequently measured through their employment rates, sectoral distribution, and income, which serve as proxies for their economic return to the individual and the state (World Bank, 2022).

However, for this review, which focuses on non-economic social contributions, HCT reveals significant limitations. Its primary critique lies in its instrumental and economistic reductionism (Marginson, 2019). By focusing predominantly on private, monetary returns, HCT fails to adequately capture:

Intrinsic and Non-Market Values: The value of a graduate's work in fostering democratic citizenship, promoting public health, preserving culture, or volunteering is not easily quantifiable in monetary terms and is thus often rendered invisible within a strict HCT framework (McMahon, 2009).

Public Good Externalities: HCT primarily conceptualises benefits as private goods accruing to the individual graduate. It fails to account adequately for the positive spillover effects (externalities) of an educated populace, such as lower crime rates, greater social trust, and improved public health outcomes, which benefit society (Calhoun, 2006).

The Motivations for Contribution: The theory implies a primarily self-interested, utility-maximising actor. It offers little insight into the altruistic, civic, or ethical motivations that drive graduates to serve in underpaid public sectors or engage in community development (Brennan & Naidoo, 2008).

Therefore, while HCT provides a foundational understanding of one dimension of graduate value, its narrow focus necessitates the incorporation of broader frameworks to fully illuminate the social contributions that are the central concern of this review.

5.2. Social Capital Theory: The Architecture of Connectivity and Trust

Social Capital Theory offers a powerful complementary lens, shifting the focus from individual attributes to the value embedded in social networks, relationships, and norms of reciprocity. Bourdieu (1986, p. 248) defined social capital as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition." Putnam (2000) further distinguished between bonding social capital (exclusive ties within a homogeneous group, providing social and emotional support) and bridging social capital (inclusive ties across diverse social groups, providing access to new information and resources).

Public universities in Sri Lanka are critical sites for the formation of both bonding and bridging social capital.

Bonding Capital: Universities create strong, dense networks among peers, within disciplines, and through alum associations. These networks can be mobilised for collective action, such as alum groups funding university infrastructure or providing scholarships (Seneviratne et al., 2020).

Bridging Capital: Perhaps more importantly for societal contribution, universities bring together students from different ethnic, religious, and regional backgrounds. When functioning effectively, they can foster the cross-cutting ties essential for national integration and social cohesion in a post-conflict society (Orjuela, 2020). A graduate who maintains relationships across ethnic lines is better equipped to foster reconciliation and

collaborative community projects.

The contribution of graduates, then, can be understood not just through their individual human capital but through their role as nodes and brokers in social networks. They leverage their university-acquired social capital to:

Mobilise resources for community development (Gomez, 2022).

Facilitate the exchange of information between government agencies and local communities.

Build trust in public institutions through their professional conduct (Transparency International Sri Lanka, 2022).

Coleman (1988) emphasised that social capital facilitates action and creates value that would not otherwise be possible. Thus, a graduate's ability to contribute to a flood relief effort or a public health campaign is often contingent on the networks of trust and cooperation they can activate, a dimension completely overlooked by Human Capital Theory.

5.3. The "Public Good" and "Social Good" of Higher Education

In direct contrast to the private-good orientation of HCT, the "Public Good" framework asserts that higher education generates benefits that are non-rivalrous and non-excludable, that is, they are available to all members of society and one person's consumption does not diminish another's (Marginson, 2016). This perspective views universities as vital institutions for democracy, social justice, and the production of knowledge for the common benefit (Calhoun, 2006).

UNESCO (2021) has been a prominent advocate of this view, framing education as a fundamental human right and a public responsibility essential for building more peaceful and sustainable societies. From this vantage point, the social contributions of graduates are not merely incidental outcomes but are central to the very raison d'être of a public university system.

This framework allows us to categorise graduate contributions as manifestations of higher education's public good function:

Contributions to Democratic Life: Graduates serving as civil servants, journalists, or human rights activists uphold democratic norms, transparency, and accountability (Uyangoda, 2020).

Promotion of Social Equity: By serving in rural areas as doctors and teachers, graduates help mitigate geographic and social inequalities in access to essential services (Little, 2020).

Advancement of Knowledge for Public Benefit: Research conducted by university graduates and faculty that addresses local challenges, such as climate-resilient agriculture or endemic diseases, constitutes a classic public good (National Science Foundation, 2023).

Cultural Stewardship: The work of graduates in preserving linguistic diversity, historical research, and the arts enriches the national cultural heritage, a benefit shared by all

(Wickramasinghe, 2021).

The "Social Good" concept, as explored by Brennan and Naidoo (2008), extends this idea by emphasising the role of higher education in directly addressing social problems and promoting welfare. This review, therefore, uses the public/social good framework to evaluate the extent to which the contributions of Sri Lankan graduates align with this foundational ideal of higher education.

5.4. The "Third Mission" of Universities: Institutionalising Engagement

Closely related to the concept of the public good, but with a more focused institutional strategy, is the framework of the "Third Mission." This refers to the direct engagement of universities with society and the economy, beyond their traditional first mission (teaching) and second mission (research) (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020). The Third Mission encompasses a wide range of activities, including technology transfer, continuing education, social outreach, and community partnership (Zomer & Benneworth, 2011).

This framework is crucial for this review because it shifts the analytical focus from the individual graduate to the institutional context that shapes them. It prompts the question: To what extent do Sri Lankan public universities actively foster and facilitate a culture of social contribution among their students? The graduate's subsequent contributions can be seen as a long-term, diffuse outcome of the university's third mission activities.

Key mechanisms include:

Curricular Integration: Service-learning, mandatory community-based projects, and ethics education embedded in degree programs (Erasmus et al., 2021).

Extra-Curricular Platforms: Support for student clubs, volunteer organisations, and outreach programs that engage with community needs.

Alumni Relations: Structured programs that channel the expertise and resources of graduates back into societal development (Seneviratne et al., 2020).

A critique of the Third Mission literature is that it is often driven by a Global North, entrepreneurial university model (Altbach et al., 2019). This review will therefore examine how the Third Mission manifests in the specific socio-economic context of Sri Lanka, where institutional resources may be constrained but societal needs are acute.

5.5. The Graduate Capital Model: An Integrative Framework

To overcome the limitations of a singular theoretical focus, this review also draws upon the emergent Graduate Capital Model, most prominently articulated by Tomlinson (2017). This model proposes that graduates possess a portfolio of interconnected "capitals" that they leverage for career and life success. While developed in the context of employability, its multidimensionality makes it highly applicable to understanding broader social contributions.

The model expands beyond Human Capital to include:

Social Capital: As defined by Social Capital Theory, the networks and relationships that graduates can access.

Cultural Capital: The embodied dispositions, linguistic competencies, and cultural knowledge that provide access to and legitimacy within different social fields (Bourdieu, 1986). A graduate's ability to navigate both formal bureaucratic systems and local community structures is a form of cultural capital that enables contribution.

Identity Capital: The sense of a strong, coherent self, self-efficacy, and personal agency (Tomlinson, 2017). A graduate's belief that they can effect positive change in their community is a critical form of identity capital that drives civic engagement.

Psychological Capital: Attributes such as resilience, optimism, and hope (Luthans et al., 2007), which are essential for graduates working in challenging public sector or community development contexts.

This integrative model provides the most holistic framework for this systematic review. It allows us to analyse a graduate's social contribution not as a simple output of their skills (human capital), but as a complex interplay of their:

Skills and Knowledge (Human Capital),

Networks and Trust (Social Capital),

Cultural Fluency and Values (Cultural Capital),

Confidence and Agency (Identity Capital), and

Resilience and Optimism (Psychological Capital).

For example, a graduate leading a successful rural development project is likely to combine technical expertise (H), local community connections (S), an understanding of local norms (C), a strong belief in their ability to lead (I), and the perseverance to overcome obstacles (P).

5.6. Synthesis: A Multi-Theoretical Lens for Analysis

No single framework can fully capture the multifaceted phenomenon of graduate social contribution. Therefore, this review employs these five frameworks as an integrated, multi-theoretical lens.

Human Capital Theory establishes the baseline of individual capability but is critiqued for its economism.

Social Capital Theory illuminates the relational infrastructure that enables collective action.

The Public/Social Good Framework provides the normative foundation and societal purpose for these contributions.

The Third Mission focuses on the institutional role in cultivating a contributory ethos.

The Graduate Capital Model offers a comprehensive, person-centric framework that integrates multiple dimensions of graduate capability.

This pluralistic approach will guide the thematic synthesis of the literature, allowing for a critical analysis that is attentive to economic, social, cultural, and institutional

dimensions. This review enables not only the documentation of what contributions graduates make, but also the theorisation of how and why these contributions are generated, and within what broader ideological and institutional contexts. This elevates the review from a descriptive summary to a conceptually grounded and analytically robust scholarly contribution.

6. Thematic Synthesis of Findings

The systematic search and selection process yielded a diverse body of literature that, when synthesised, reveals a complex and multifaceted portrait of the social contributions of graduates from Sri Lanka's public universities. The findings are organised into four central themes that correspond to the domains of social contribution outlined in the conceptual framework, culminating in a critical analysis of the challenges that mediate and mitigate these contributions. This synthesis demonstrates that while graduates are pivotal actors in national development, their impact is deeply shaped by structural, political, and global forces.

6.1. Theme 1: The Bedrock of the State: Contribution to Public Service and Nation-Building

The most extensively documented contribution of public university graduates lies in their role as the primary human resource for the country's essential public services. This theme directly reflects the original nation-building mandate of the university system and represents a massive, sustained transfer of human capital from the academy to the state.

6.1.1. Education Sector: Cultivating Future Generations

Graduates, particularly those from faculties of education and arts, form the backbone of the national school system. Their contribution extends beyond mere employment statistics; they are crucial agents of socialisation and knowledge dissemination. Studies by Little (2020) and the National Education Commission (2021) highlight that a significant majority of principals and senior teachers in government schools are products of the public university system, especially the universities of Peradeniya, Colombo, and Kelaniya. These educators are often posted to rural and remote areas, playing a critical role in mitigating geographic inequities in educational quality (Jayaweera, 2019). Their work involves not only curriculum delivery but also mentoring, managing scarce resources, and acting as community leaders. However, research also highlights challenges, including frustration among graduate teachers due to inadequate resources, excessive administrative duties, and a perceived devaluation of their profession, which can erode their morale and effectiveness (Herath, 2020).

6.1.2. Healthcare Sector: Guardians of Public Well-being

The Sri Lankan public healthcare system, lauded for its robust indicators, is fundamentally dependent on graduates from medical and allied health sciences faculties. Doctors, nurses, and public health specialists trained at institutions such as the University of Peradeniya and the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Colombo are at the forefront of the national health service (Ministry of Health, 2021). Their contributions are evident in the successful management of infectious diseases, the high rates of maternal and child health, and the extensive network of district hospitals and public health inspectorates (Gunatilake, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic served as a stark recent example, where public health graduates were instrumental in contact tracing, epidemiological

surveillance, and managing public communication campaigns (Fernando et al., 2021). This sector exemplifies a direct, high-impact social contribution, where graduate human capital is directly converted into societal well-being, often under demanding conditions and for remuneration that is not commensurate with that of their private-sector counterparts.

6.1.3. Public Administration & Governance: The Administrative Spine

The Sri Lankan Administrative Service (SLAS) and other central government ministries are predominantly staffed by graduates from the faculties of arts, law, and management of public universities. These civil servants are the operational arm of the state, responsible for implementing national policies, managing development projects, and maintaining law and order at the grassroots level (Gunatilake, 2021). Their role in nation-building is profound, as they translate legislative mandates into tangible public services and programs. Uyangoda (2020) argues that despite systemic challenges, the relative stability of the Sri Lankan state through various crises is partly attributable to the institutional continuity provided by this cadre of educated administrators. However, the literature is also replete with critiques of this system, noting that political interference, entrenched bureaucracy, and a culture of risk-aversion can stifle innovation and dilute the potential positive impact of these graduates (Transparency International Sri Lanka, 2022). The contribution, therefore, is a paradox: they are essential for governance, yet the system they uphold can sometimes impede transformative development.

6.2. Theme 2: Grassroots Mobilisation: Community Development and Civic Engagement

Beyond formal state structures, graduates make significant contributions through voluntary and community-based initiatives. This theme highlights the activation of their social capital and intrinsic motivation to address local needs, often filling gaps left by the state.

6.2.1. Alumni Associations as Engines of Development

University alumni associations are powerful vehicles for channelling graduate resources back into society. The most prominent example is the University of Peradeniya Alumni Association, which has funded infrastructure projects, endowed professorial chairs, and provided scholarships for disadvantaged students (Seneviratne et al., 2020). Similar associations from other universities regularly organise medical camps, legal aid clinics, and entrepreneurship workshops for their surrounding communities. These initiatives demonstrate a sustained commitment to the university's "third mission" and leverage the bonding social capital of graduate networks for public benefit (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020).

6.2.2. Leadership in Civil Society and NGOs

Graduates often assume leadership roles in non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community-based organisations (CBOs), where they drive initiatives focused on human rights, environmental conservation, gender equality, and poverty alleviation. Gomez (2022) documents how university-educated elites were instrumental in founding and leading civil society organisations that played a critical watchdog role during and after the civil war, advocating for democratic governance and ethnic reconciliation. Their expertise in project management, research, and advocacy, honed at the university, makes them effective agents of social change outside the government apparatus.

6.2.3. Volunteerism in Times of Crisis

The propensity for volunteerism among graduates is most visible during national disasters. The response to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami was a landmark event, where thousands of graduates, particularly from medical and engineering faculties, spontaneously organised relief efforts, providing emergency care, rebuilding infrastructure, and coordinating aid distribution (Perera, 2022). More recently, during the COVID-19 pandemic, graduate volunteers played a crucial role in staffing vaccination centres, developing public health information materials, and supporting vulnerable communities during lockdowns (Fernando et al., 2021). These episodes reveal a deep-seated ethic of social responsibility and an ability to mobilise rapidly, showcasing the latent capacity for collective action embedded in the graduate populace.

6.3. Theme 3: The Intellectual and Cultural Commons: Knowledge Production and Cultural Stewardship

This theme encompasses the less tangible but equally vital contributions graduates make through the creation, preservation, and dissemination of knowledge and culture, enriching the nation's intellectual and cultural fabric.

6.3.1. Scientific Research Addressing Local Challenges

While Sri Lanka's research and development expenditure is modest, public university graduates are at the forefront of producing locally relevant knowledge. Research published in journals such as the Sri Lankan Journal of Agricultural Sciences and reports from the National Science Foundation (2023) highlight work by agricultural graduates on developing climate-resilient crop varieties, by engineering graduates on implementing appropriate water management technologies, and by medical researchers on combating endemic diseases like dengue and leptospirosis. This form of knowledge dissemination is a quintessential public good, as the benefits of such innovations are widely shared and address pressing national problems (Marginson, 2016).

6.3.2. Cultural Stewardship and Public Discourse

Graduates from the humanities and arts faculties play an indispensable role as custodians of Sri Lanka's rich and complex cultural heritage. Historians, archaeologists, linguists, and sociologists from universities like Jaffna, Peradeniya, and Colombo are responsible for preserving ancient manuscripts, documenting oral traditions, and producing critical scholarship on the nation's history and identity (Wickramasinghe, 2021). Furthermore, graduates permeate the media industry as journalists, editors, and producers, shaping public discourse and informing the citizenry. Their work, however, exists in a contested space, as noted by Orjuela (2020), who observes that narratives around history and identity are often polarised along ethnic lines, reflecting broader societal tensions.

6.4. Theme 4: The Mediating Challenges: Structural and Systemic Hurdles

The literature unequivocally demonstrates that the social contributions of graduates are not realised in a vacuum but are constrained by a series of formidable challenges. This theme critically examines the factors that limit, divert, or diminish the potential impact of graduate contributions.

6.4.1. The "Brain Drain": The Exodus of Talent

Perhaps the most widely discussed challenge is the emigration of high-achieving graduates, a phenomenon that represents a significant loss of public investment in human capital. Driven by factors including political instability, a perceived lack of opportunities, and higher remuneration abroad, this "brain drain" disproportionately affects fields such as medicine, engineering, and IT (Dassanayake, 2022). A study by the Institute of Policy Studies (2021) estimated that a substantial number of medical graduates from a single cohort were working overseas a decade after graduation. This not only depletes the public sector of critical skills but also represents a net loss of the social capital and potential for innovation these individuals represent.

6.4.2. Political Interference and Bureaucratic Inertia

Literature consistently identifies political interference and a rigid bureaucracy as major impediments within both the university system and the public sector. In universities, political appointments to administrative positions and the politicisation of student unions can compromise academic autonomy and disrupt the learning environment (Uyangoda, 2020). Within the public service, where many graduates are employed, frequent transfers based on political allegiance rather than merit, and cumbersome administrative procedures can stifle initiative and discourage graduates from proposing innovative solutions (Transparency International Sri Lanka, 2022). This environment can lead to cynicism and a "work-to-rule" culture, thereby muting the potential for transformative contribution.

6.4.3. The Skill Mismatch Debate

A persistent critique, often voiced by the private sector and international bodies like the World Bank (2022), is the misalignment between university curricula and the skills required by the modern economy and society. Critics argue that an overemphasis on theoretical knowledge in certain disciplines fails to equip graduates with practical problem-solving skills, digital literacy, and soft skills (Liyanage & Abeywickrama, 2021). While this argument is often framed in economic terms, it has social ramifications. A graduate who is critically and creatively under-equipped is less able to contribute effectively to solving complex societal problems, whether in public administration, community development, or entrepreneurial ventures.

6.4.4. Navigating Ethnic and Social Divisions

The potential for graduates to act as bridges across Sri Lanka's ethnic and social divides is often curtailed by the very realities of those divisions. The university system itself is not immune to societal tensions. Studies have shown that informal segregation, linguistic barriers, and ethnocentric curricula can sometimes reinforce rather than ameliorate inter-group prejudices (Orjuela, 2020). Consequently, the "bridging social capital" theorised by Putnam (2000) is not automatically generated. A graduate's ability to contribute across communal lines is often dependent on their individual disposition and experiences. It can be actively hampered by societal suspicion and the political instrumentalisation of ethnic identity (Gomez, 2022). This represents a critical limitation on the full realisation of their potential as agents of social cohesion.

7. Critical Analysis and Identification of Gaps

The preceding thematic synthesis reveals a rich, albeit fragmented, body of evidence attesting to the multifaceted social contributions of graduates from Sri Lanka's public

universities. However, a critical analysis of this literature exposes significant deficiencies that limit its cumulative power, theoretical sophistication, and practical utility. This section moves beyond synthesis to deliver a pointed critique, identifying three overarching categories of gaps, methodological, conceptual, and contextual, that must be addressed to advance this field of inquiry. By systematically delineating these shortcomings, this review not only consolidates existing knowledge but also provides a definitive roadmap for future research.

7.1. Methodological Gaps: The Empirical Deficit

The most pronounced weakness in the extant literature lies in its methodological limitations. The evidence base is characterised by a preponderance of studies that lack the rigour, scale, and design necessary to make robust, generalizable claims or to trace causal pathways.

7.1.1. The Hegemony of Small-Scale and Anecdotal Evidence

A significant portion of the literature relies on small-scale, localised case studies, often focusing on a single university, an alumni association, or a professional cohort. While these studies provide valuable depth and context, their findings are not generalizable to the national graduate population (Perera, 2022). For instance, a detailed ethnography of a single medical alum project, while insightful, cannot speak to the broader patterns of contribution from all medical graduates. Furthermore, there is an over-reliance on anecdotal evidence and personal narratives in policy documents and even some scholarly works, which, while compelling, substitute rigorous data collection with illustrative examples (World Bank, 2022). This creates literature that is rich in illustration but poor in representative evidence, making it difficult to ascertain the true scale and distribution of social contributions.

7.1.2. The Absence of Longitudinal and Causal Research

Perhaps the most critical methodological gap is the near-total absence of longitudinal research. The current literature offers primarily cross-sectional snapshots, capturing contributions at a single point in time. This design is ill-suited for understanding how social contributions evolve over a graduate's life course, what factors in the university experience or early career trigger sustained civic engagement, or what the long-term societal return on investment in public higher education truly is (Marginson, 2019). Without longitudinal cohort studies, it is impossible to establish a causal relationship based solely on correlation. We can observe that a graduate is a dedicated public servant. However, we cannot determine the extent to which this is a result of their university education, their pre-existing values, or their subsequent professional socialisation (Tomlinson, 2017).

7.1.3. The Lack of Standardised Metrics and Comparative Frameworks

The field suffers from a profound lack of standardised, validated metrics for measuring "social contribution." Studies employ a bewildering array of indicators, from simple counts of volunteer hours to subjective assessments of community impact, making meta-analysis or even direct comparison across futile studies (Liamputtong, 2020). There is no equivalent for social contribution to the economic metrics of employment rate or salary. This methodological vagueness mirrors the conceptual ambiguity discussed below. Developing a "Social Contribution Index" that integrates quantitative and qualitative

dimensions—such as scope, scale, sustainability, and impact—would be a significant step forward, enabling systematic benchmarking and tracking over time (Zomer & Benneworth, 2011). The failure to operationalise the concept consistently remains a major impediment to building a coherent body of knowledge.

7.2. Conceptual Gaps: The Theoretical Void

Beyond methodological weaknesses, literature is characterised by significant conceptual underdevelopment. The research is often data-driven, lacking a strong theoretical compass, which leads to a body of work that is descriptive rather than analytically powerful.

7.2.1. The Vague and Un-Theorised Concept of "Contribution"

As previewed in the introduction, the core concept of "social contribution" is frequently used but rarely defined with precision. Many studies adopt an implicit, commonsense understanding, leading to a conflation of activities (e.g., volunteering) with outcomes (e.g., community empowerment) and impacts (e.g., improved social cohesion) (Brennan & Naidoo, 2008). This lack of conceptual clarity obscures the mechanisms at play. For example, is a graduate's contribution primarily a function of their deployed human capital (skills), their social capital (networks), or their cultural and identity capital (values and agency)? Literature, by and large, does not engage with these questions, treating contribution as monolithic output rather than a multi-dimensional construct (Tomlinson, 2017).

7.2.2. The Dominance and Uncritical Application of Human Capital Theory

When theoretical frameworks are invoked, there is an over-reliance on Human Capital Theory (HCT), even when studying non-economic outcomes. This creates a conceptual misfit, as discussed in Section 6, forcing non-market values into market-based logic (Marginson, 2019). Literature has been slow to adopt more fitting frameworks, such as Social Capital Theory (Putnam, 2000) or the Public Good paradigm (Calhoun, 2006), systematically. While a few studies mention these concepts in passing, they are seldom used as the primary analytical lens to structure the research and interpret findings. This theoretical stagnation limits the ability to generate novel insights about the relational, normative, and institutional foundations of graduate contributions.

7.2.3. The Neglect of a Capitals-Based, Integrative Framework

Following the above, there is a glaring absence of research that utilises an integrative model, such as the Graduate Capital Model (Tomlinson, 2017), to understand social contribution. The existing literature tends to examine dimensions in isolation, a study on alum networks (social capital) here, a study on teacher motivation (identity capital) there. No study was found that explicitly investigates how the different forms of capital (human, social, cultural, identity, and psychological) interact, accumulate, and convert into social value in the Sri Lankan context. A capital-based framework would provide a much-needed, holistic, and dynamic model for understanding the resources that graduates draw upon to make their contributions, moving the field beyond simplistic input-output models.

7.3. Contextual Gaps: The Unexplored Territories

Significant contextual blind spots also mark the existing research landscape. Certain populations, comparative dimensions, and career pathways have been largely

overlooked, resulting in an incomplete and potentially biased picture.

7.3.1. The Disciplinary Silo: Uneven Focus on Graduate Cohorts

The literature exhibits a distinct bias towards studying graduates from high-profile professions, particularly medicine, engineering, and, to a lesser extent, education. The contributions of graduates from the Humanities, Social Sciences, and Arts remain severely under-documented and under-theorised (Wickramasinghe, 2021). How do historians, sociologists, or artists from universities like Jaffna or Ruhuna shape public discourse, cultural preservation, and social critique? This disciplinary siloing means that the full spectrum of social contribution is not captured, and the unique value of an arts education to the public good remains largely unarticulated in empirical terms.

7.3.2. The Invisible Agents: The Role of Female Graduates

A critical and surprising gap is the lack of gendered analysis of social contribution. While female participation in public universities has increased dramatically, there is a scarcity of research examining how gender mediates the nature, scope, and recognition of graduate contributions (Jayaweera, 2019). Do female graduates, who may face different societal expectations and structural barriers, channel their contributions in different ways? Are they more likely to engage in certain types of civic engagement or community-based work? The intersection of gender, discipline, and contribution is a fertile and entirely unexplored area that is essential for a complete understanding of the phenomenon.

7.3.3. The Missing Comparator: Intra- and Inter-Sectoral Analyses

The literature lacks rigorous comparative studies. First, there are no systematic comparisons of the contribution profiles of graduates from different universities (e.g., the historically entrenched University of Peradeniya versus the more recently established South Eastern University). Such studies could reveal how institutional culture, history, and location shape graduate outcomes (Altbach et al., 2019). Second, and perhaps more importantly, there is a stark absence of research comparing the social contributions of graduates who pursue careers in the public sector versus those who enter the private sector or become entrepreneurs. The dominant assumption is that public sector employment is the primary route for social contribution. This overlooks the potential for private sector graduates to contribute through corporate social responsibility initiatives, social entrepreneurship, and ethical business leadership that generate jobs and foster economic resilience (Liyanage & Abeywickrama, 2021). This public-private dichotomy in contribution pathways remains a presumption rather than an evidence-based conclusion.

7.3.4. The Diaspora Dimension: Transnational Contributions

While "brain drain" is well-studied as a problem, the potential "brain gain" or diaspora contribution is almost absent from the literature (Dassanayake, 2022). The contributions of graduates who have emigrated, whether through remittances, knowledge transfer, transnational advocacy, or investment in local startups, represent a significant blind spot in the field. Understanding how the Sri Lankan diaspora, largely composed of public university graduates, maintains ties and contributes to their homeland would provide a more nuanced picture of the global footprint of the national university system.

Synthesis of the Critical Landscape

In summary, the critical analysis reveals a field at a nascent stage of development. It is constrained by:

Methodologically, a reliance on small-scale, non-longitudinal studies and a failure to develop standardised metrics.

Conceptually, there is a vagueness around its core subject and an underutilization of sophisticated theoretical frameworks beyond the economic paradigm.

Contextually, a narrow focus on certain disciplines and sectors is evident, while others are overlooked (e.g., the arts, female graduates, the private sector, and the diaspora).

These gaps collectively limit the ability of researchers, university leaders, and policymakers to fully understand, measure, and ultimately enhance the social value generated by one of the nation's most vital public assets, its university graduates. The following concluding section will translate this critical analysis into a definitive agenda for future research designed to address these deficiencies and propel the field forward.

8. Conclusion and Avenues for Future Research

This systematic review undertakes a comprehensive synthesis and critical analysis of the literature on the social contributions of graduates from Sri Lanka's public universities. By moving beyond the dominant econometric narrative of employability, this review has highlighted the profound, though often unquantifiable, ways in which these graduates form the bedrock of the nation's social fabric, public institutions, and civic life. The journey through the extant literature reveals a landscape of significant achievement juxtaposed with systemic challenges and critical scholarly gaps. This concluding section serves to consolidate the key insights, derive their implications for policy and practice, and, most importantly, chart a definitive and actionable agenda for future research to advance this vital field of study.

8.1. Summary of Key Insights: The Multifaceted Nature of Contribution

The evidence synthesised in this review compellingly demonstrates that the social contributions of public university graduates are multifaceted, permeating every layer of Sri Lankan society. The findings are crystallised around four central themes:

First, graduates are the bedrock of the state, forming the essential human capital that staffs and manages the country's education, healthcare, and public administration systems. Their service in these sectors, often in challenging conditions and for modest remuneration, represents a significant and sustained transfer of knowledge and skills from the academy to the public, directly supporting the nation's development indicators and institutional continuity (Gunatilake, 2021; Little, 2020).

Second, beyond formal state structures, graduates are pivotal agents of grassroots mobilisation and civic engagement. Through alum associations, leadership in NGOs and CBOs, and spontaneous volunteerism during crises, they activate social capital and demonstrate a deep-seated ethic of social responsibility (Gomez, 2022; Seneviratne et al., 2020). This highlights a contribution model that is relational and community-oriented, complementing the individual-capital model of public service.

Third, graduates are the custodians of the nation's intellectual and cultural heritage. Through scientific research addressing local problems, the preservation and critical interrogation of cultural heritage, and their roles in media and public discourse, they enrich the nation's knowledge base and shape its collective identity (National Science Foundation, 2023; Wickramasinghe, 2021). This highlights the role of higher education as a public good that generates non-rival and non-excludable benefits for all (Marginson, 2016).

Ultimately, these contributions are consistently hindered by a range of structural and systemic challenges. The "brain drain" of talent, political interference, bureaucratic inertia, debates over skill relevance, and the pervasive influence of ethnic and social divisions collectively hinder the full realisation of graduate potential (Dassanayake, 2022; Transparency International Sri Lanka, 2022; Uyangoda, 2020). The social contribution of graduates is, therefore, not an automatic output but a negotiated outcome, shaped by the complex interplay of individual agency, institutional culture, and the broader political economy.

8.2. Policy Implications: From Evidence to Action

The findings of this review carry significant implications for university leaders, policymakers, and accreditation bodies. To better nurture, recognise, and amplify the social contributions of graduates, a strategic shift in policy and practice is urgently needed.

For University Leaders and Academic Staff:

1. Curricular Reforms for Civic Agency: Integrate civic engagement and service-learning as core components of the undergraduate curriculum across all disciplines (Erasmus et al., 2021). This could involve mandatory community-based projects, courses on ethics and social responsibility, and pedagogical approaches that foster critical thinking and problem-solving related to local challenges.

2. Formalising the "Third Mission": Move beyond ad-hoc outreach by strategically institutionalising the university's social mission. This includes creating dedicated offices for community engagement, establishing clear incentives for academics involved in socially relevant work, and forging sustainable partnerships with local government and civil society organisations (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020).

3. Fostering Inclusive and Cohesive Campus Cultures: Actively design programs and spaces that promote bridging social capital across ethnic, religious, and socio-economic lines. This is a critical investment in producing graduates who are equipped to be agents of reconciliation and social cohesion (Orjuela, 2020).

For Policymakers and the University Grants Commission (UGC):

1. Developing a Multi-Dimensional Graduate Tracking System: Move beyond the narrow metric of employment rates. Mandate and fund the development of a national framework for tracking graduate outcomes that systematically captures indicators of social contribution, such as participation in public service, civic leadership, and community development (Perera, 2022).

2. Performance-Based Funding Incentives: Introduce a component of university funding that is linked to demonstrable social impact and community engagement, as measured

by the proposed tracking system. This would incentivise institutions to take their "third mission" seriously (Zomer & Benneworth, 2011).

3. Policy Support for Retaining Talent: Develop targeted policies to mitigate "brain drain," not only through financial incentives but also by creating environments within the public sector that foster professional growth, innovation, and meritocracy (Institute of Policy Studies, 2021).

For Accreditation and Quality Assurance Bodies:

1. Incorporate Social Impact into Accreditation Standards: Revise quality assurance frameworks to include criteria that assess how effectively universities are preparing students for civic leadership and social responsibility, and how they are engaging with their communities to generate public value (UNESCO, 2021).

8.3. Avenues for Future Research: A Definitive Agenda

The critical analysis in Section 8 revealed a field ripe for methodological and conceptual advancement. To address the identified gaps, future research should be guided by the following specific and actionable agenda:

1. The Measurement Imperative: Developing a "Social Contribution Index" (SCI)

Primary Research Question: How can the social contributions of university graduates be validly, reliably, and comparably measured across different disciplines and contexts?

Action: A multi-phase, mixed-methods study to develop and validate an SCI. This would involve qualitative work to define domains and indicators (e.g., scope, scale, sustainability, impact) followed by quantitative surveys to test the metric's robustness across diverse graduate cohorts (Liamputtong, 2020). This foundational work is a prerequisite for all large-scale comparative and longitudinal research.

2. The Life-Course Perspective: Launching Longitudinal Cohort Studies

Primary Research Question: How do the social contributions of public university graduates evolve over their life course, and what are the key predictors (university experiences, early career paths, personal values) of sustained versus declining engagement?

Action: Secure funding for a decade-long longitudinal study, tracking a representative cohort of graduates from multiple universities from their final year through their early and mid-career stages. This is the only way to move from snapshots to a dynamic understanding and establish causal pathways (Marginson, 2019).

3. The Black Box of Causality: Linking University Experiences to Lifelong Engagement

Primary Research Question: What specific university experiences—such as participation in specific extra-curricular activities, exposure to critical pedagogies, relationships with mentors, or engagement in service-learning—are most causally significant in fostering later-life social contribution?

Action: Conduct in-depth qualitative life-history interviews and comparative case studies with graduates who are recognised as high contributors. Coupled with longitudinal data,

this can unpack the "black box" of the university experience and identify the most impactful educational practices (Tomlinson, 2017).

4. The Contextual Specificities: Targeted Investigations into Under-Researched Areas

Post-War Reconciliation:

Question: How do graduates from different ethnic backgrounds conceptualise and enact their social contribution in relation to post-war reconciliation, and what barriers and facilitators do they encounter?

Action: A comparative, multi-sited ethnographic study of Tamil, Sinhala, and Muslim graduates working in civil society, education, and public administration in the Northern, Eastern, and Southern provinces.

The Gender Dimension:

Question: In what ways do the pathways, forms, and recognition of social contribution differ for female graduates, and how do gender norms and institutional structures shape these outcomes?

Action: A mixed-methods study employing the proposed SCI with a gender-disaggregated sample, complemented by focus group discussions to explore the lived experiences of female graduates (Jayaweera, 2019).

The Private Sector and Diaspora:

Question: What is the nature and scale of social contribution among graduates who pursue careers in the private sector or emigrate, and how can these pathways be strategically leveraged for national development?

Action: Survey and network analysis of alumni in leading private firms and key diaspora hubs to map their forms of engagement, from CSR and social entrepreneurship to remittances and knowledge networks (Dassanayake, 2022).

In conclusion, this systematic review has consolidated the evidence on a critically important yet understudied aspect of Sri Lankan higher education. It has been argued that the value of a public university graduate cannot be captured in employment statistics alone. Their true worth lies in their combined roles as public servants, community leaders, knowledge creators, and ethical citizens. By adopting the policy recommendations and pursuing the robust research agenda outlined here, stakeholders can begin to fully understand, measure, and ultimately enhance this immense social contribution, thereby strengthening the covenant between the university and the society it serves.

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