

# **Enhancing Employability of Management Graduates of State Universities in Sri Lanka: An Examination of Job Market Requirements**

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## **Abstract**

*Higher education helps in enhancing the human resources required for development. Universities and higher education institutes play a vital role in disseminating and creating knowledge through teaching and research, contributing to the development of any country. The quality and relevance of the output (graduates) of higher education institutes need to be enhanced to increase graduates' employability. Graduate unemployment has become a significant problem in Sri Lanka. If graduates are unemployed, this will directly and negatively influence economic development. The main objectives of this study are to identify job market requirements of the industry and factors affecting the success of the graduates' interviews. This study used qualitative research methods as a mono method. Data were collected using advertisements from two selected leading English and Sinhala weekend newspapers published from October 2019 to January 2020, and in-depth interviews were conducted with selected Human Resource managers. Newspaper analysis and job market requirement analysis were done using an inductive thematic analysis approach. Five core skills were identified as the job market requirements, namely, problem-solving skills, communication skills, numeracy skills, computer skills, and interpersonal skills. Leadership qualities, communication and presentation ability, teamwork, interpersonal relations, practical knowledge, positive*

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*attitudes, hardworking characteristics, well-preparedness at the interview, and a clear understanding of the graduate's career path mainly affect the graduate interview's success. The study proposes policy measures to improve the employability of management graduates of state universities in Sri Lanka.*

**Keywords:** *Employability, Management Graduates, State Universities, job market requirements, Sri Lanka*

## **Introduction**

Education is one of the major factors in attaining sustainable human development in any country. The quality and relevance of the output (graduates) of higher education institutes need to be enhanced to increase graduates' employability. If graduates are employable, this would directly contribute to economic development. Though several thousand graduates are produced annually both by private and foreign universities in Sri Lanka, the available job opportunities are limited due to the competition arising from graduates from non-state and foreign universities.

With the expansion of access to higher education, graduate unemployment also increases. Hence, the unemployment of state university graduates is a national issue because a substantial number of resources are invested by the government of Sri Lanka each year to provide education up to the university education level (Fernando, 2013). The government of Sri Lanka has allocated 1.8% of the GDP for the territory's education (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2021) and there should be a return on investment in education in terms of both institutional and national levels (Liyanage et al., 2017). Higher education institutes should provide quality graduates to improve their employability. The employability of graduates needs to be increased for improving the return on investment in education which is an important researchable area.

Employability is defined as a set of skills, knowledge, and personal attributes that make an individual more likely to be safe and be successful in their preferred occupation to the benefit of themselves, the workforce, the community, and the economy (Moreland, 2006). Some argue that the graduates of the State Universities in Sri Lanka lack the required skills (Liyanage et al., 2016). However, this argument must be investigated more carefully as the government and the public sector have not sufficiently created job opportunities due to the poor expansion of the economy. According to a preliminary investigation done by the researcher, a considerable number of graduates in the Management and Social Science fields have to wait for more than one to two

years to get a suitable job. Many of them are compelled to be engaged with any job not commensurate with their qualifications and training in addition to a lower salary. The graduates need to improve various socio-emotional skills along with their academic achievements. Thus, graduates need to improve various skills, but which types of skills are most attractive to the employer and what skills are essential to enhance employability are the focus of this study. Thus, this study identifies job market requirements and significant factors affecting the success of the graduates' interviews for improving the employability of management graduates of State Universities in Sri Lanka.

### ***Problem identification***

In the contemporary world, graduates' employment has a considerable role in the development process of a country, and employability has become a critical problem in developing countries like Sri Lanka. Unemployment is a crisis that affects graduates and the country's productivity. In 2019, the unemployment rate was 4.8% (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2021), and graduate unemployment has become a significant issue in Sri Lanka. From 1942 to the mid-1960, university education guaranteed employment opportunities in both private and public sectors (Samaranayake, 2016). Since late 1960, graduates have begun to experience difficulties in finding jobs.

The unemployment rates among Sri Lankan graduates are higher than in some developing countries such as Thailand, Singapore, and Malaysia (Wickramasinghe & Perera, 2010). The average overall employability ratio of Universities in Sri Lanka is 54% (Nawaratne, 2012). Job opportunities for social science subjects have been dwindling since the late 1960s (Samaranayake, 2016). In 2012, the Faculties of Arts and Management accounted for high rates of unemployment in Sri Lanka. They counted for 76% and 36% of unemployed graduates, respectively, but in the Faculties of Medicine and Engineering, only 10% and 7% of them are unemployed (Singam, 2017). Sri Lankan Universities are lagging behind other developed and developing countries (Wickramasinghe & Perera, 2010).

According to the Ministry of Higher Education of Sri Lanka (2012) as cited in Liyanage et al., (2017) the employment rate of management graduates from all public universities in Sri Lanka is 66% of which the data was collected on the day of their convocation which is approximated to be 6-12 months after completing their degree. There were 57,000 unemployed graduates as of 31 December 2016, and this number would increase with the graduates of 2017 and

2018 (Hemmathagama, 2018). Therefore, graduate unemployment is continuing and is a serious issue.

Several pieces of research have been conducted related to the employability of graduates in Sri Lanka with a limited number of samples which are also based on secondary data. Other pieces of research are outdated, which had been conducted several years ago. Thus, this research will be based on primary data while considering the employer perspectives as research on enhancing the employability of Management undergraduates has been limited.

## **Literature Review**

Employable graduates are a critical consideration of universities around the globe, where most universities give attention to developing the required skills of their graduates. This section reviews the existing literature regarding the meaning and definition of employability theories and empirical research on graduate employability.

### ***Theoretical aspects of employability***

“Employability is a set of achievements – skills, understandings, and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefit themselves, the workforce, the community, and the economy” (Yorke, 2004). Thus, employability depends on knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Employment and employability are different terms: being employed means having a job and being employable means possessing the qualities required to maintain employment and progress in the workplace (Lees, 2002). In general, graduate employability is concerned with improving the capability of an individual student to obtain employment (Weerasinghe, 2019).

### ***Related theories on employability***

Employability can be explained by several theories, including Consensus theory, Human Capital Theory, Signaling theory, and Career Anchor.

The consensus theory assumes that the inspiring of generic skills at the university level will enhance graduates’ employability and subsequently assist them in their career progress in the labor market (Selvadurai et al., 2012, as cited in Timothy, 2018). Thus, universities need to include generic skills in

curriculums to enhance the employability of graduates as theoretical knowledge alone is not adequate in the labor market.

The human capital theory assumes that the productivity of labor can increase through education and skills training. However, several critiques have been leveled at the theory. Signaling theory tries to address these challenges of the Human Capital theory. As per the Signaling theory, focusing on education communicates in the labor market people possess various levels of innate ability but find it difficult to communicate that ability to potential employers and suggests that education may not really improve students' productive capacity, but instead, it serves as an effective method for workers to inform potential employers of their skills (Ghazarian, 2015). The signaling theory suggests that education may not increase a society's total economic capacity but instead, it serves as an effective method for workers to inform potential employers of their skills. According to the theory, people have various levels of innate ability but no easy way to communicate that ability to potential employers (Ghazarian, 2015).

Eight themes in the career anchor include functional competence, general managerial competence, independence, security, entrepreneurial creativity, sense of service, pure challenge, and lifestyle influence on an individual capability (Schein, 1978). These theories imply that education train and prepare individuals with the skills essential for the job market. However, social, economic, and political conditions would provide the foundation to convert education into an investment.

Some aspects such as the ability to lead a team and achieve results effectively and efficiently, ability to prioritize time productively, openness, positive thinking, practical mindset, willingness to learn from a cross-section of people, general knowledge including world affairs, wide interest, personal grooming, and business etiquette are also determinants of graduates' employability" (Hettige, 2000). To achieve these skills, considerable changes must be included in the existing curriculum of the degree programs.

"Soft skills" were first discussed by Moss and Tilly in 1972 (as cited in Ravindran & Bandara, 2015), and defined soft skills as "skills, abilities, and traits that pertain to personality, attitude, and behavior rather than formal or technical knowledge." These are essential at every level of the organization for the smooth and effective functioning of daily activities. As employers are looking for these skills at the interview, these skills are also recognized as

employability skills. Hard skills refer to the skills associated with the technical aspects of performing a job and usually include obtaining knowledge (Page et al., 1994). It is associated with cognitive skills (Birkett, 1993).

### ***Employers' requirements***

From an employer's perspective, "employability skills are defined as skills required not only to gain employment but also to achieve predetermined targets and contribute successfully to an organization's strategic direction" (Fonseka et al., 2015). Employers want graduates who can adapt to the workplace culture, use their capabilities and skills to develop the organization, and contribute to teamwork (Fonseka et al., 2015). Many authors see a shift in the requirements of the business because of changes in the organization of work, with employees being required to display generic problem-solving skills and adaptability as the workplace changes (Fonseka et al., 2015). As the contemporary business environment is dynamic, graduates must compete with professional qualification holders when entering the job market, and employers prefer to recruit a candidate with a professional qualification. As per Gunawardena (1997) communication skills, subject knowledge, research and analytical ability, interpersonal relations, problem-solving, self-confidence, self-management, decision-making, and judgment skills are important for improving the quality of undergraduate studies. The first graduates should have human capital attributes (knowledge, skills, and attitude of the graduates), individual attributes (including adaptation skills, leadership skills, motivational mindset, ethical and moral issues, the team works orientation, and communication skills), and the social capital attributes which link graduates' participation with the social network (such as social team building activities including language club, community club, communication club, extra curriculum participation, and social welfare participation (Hinai et al., 2020).

Genuineness, humbleness, obedience, credibility, tactfulness, sensitiveness, cooperation, devotion, being active, straightforwardness, unchangeable, altruism, innovation, leadership skills, strength, organizational skills, time management, skills of discussion, commercial knowledge, and personality are highly concerning in the job market (Luxaraj, 2019).

The main objectives of this study are to identify job market requirements of the public and private sectors in Sri Lanka while examining the factors affecting the success of the graduates' interviews and providing policy measures for

improving the employability of management graduates of the State Universities in Sri Lanka.

## **Methodology**

Based on qualitative research methods, this study identifies job market requirements using content analysis based on advertisements that appeared in two selected English and Sinhala newspapers, which had been published on the weekend for three months (from October 2019 to January 2020). Two selected newspapers are Sunday Observer, published by Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Ltd- Colombo, and Sunday Lankadeepa, published by Wijaya Newspapers Ltd- Colombo. The Sunday Observer is an English medium paper, and Lankadeepa (Sunday) is a Sinhala medium paper, and altogether 24 newspapers (12 weeks \* 2 papers) covering 03 months have been analyzed.

Inductive thematic analysis as a bottom-up approach was used to analyze the qualitative data. Inductive coding is a bottom-up approach where start with no codes and develops codes as analyzing the dataset (Caulfield, 2022).

Newspaper analysis was done using an inductive approach. Firstly, by using newspaper advertisements, data were collected and familiar with them. Then several required skills were identified as codes. After that those codes were combined into themes. As an example, when identifying communication skills “exceptional written and verbal communication skills in both English and Sinhala, presentation skills, proficiency in the Tamil language” were identified as codes, and then they were combined into one theme as Communication Skills. After that those themes were reviewed to make sure they are accurate or not. Finally, an analysis was written up under each theme.

In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted with selected human resource managers in ten (10) public and twenty (20) private organizations with unstructured questionnaires. Some interviews were conducted through face-to-face discussions by visiting those organizations. Others were conducted via zoom and telephone conversations due to the Covid-19 pandemic, as some respondents were reluctant to have physical contact. Thematic and content analyses with substantial descriptions were used to analyze the data.

Job market requirement analysis also was done using an inductive approach. In-depth interviews were conducted using an open-ended questionnaire to collect data. Questions were asked based on research questions and objectives. Then

codes were identified using those data and those codes were combined into themes. As an example “having a degree, having a degree with a class, a degree with specialized knowledge (specialization) and work experience” are identified as codes and then they were combined into one theme as “Required Academic qualifications and Working Experience”. After the reviewing themes, an analysis was written.

## **Findings and Discussion**

The analysis of the study is two-fold; Newspaper analysis and in-depth analysis based on the selected employers.

### *Analysis of newspapers*

The study found 62 advertisements published by the private sector, and 20 advertisements published by the public sector from 06<sup>th</sup> October 2019 to 26<sup>th</sup> January 2020. Most job vacancies are related to the lower level of management (supervisors, officers, and assistants) and middle management level.

Most of the vacancies in the newspapers were in Production/Manufacturing and Electronic/IT-Based Companies. The least number of vacancies appeared concerned Newspaper Companies, Hotels, Apparel Companies, Security Firms, and Government Boards. The most vacant position is the Manager, and some other vacant positions are Business Coordinator, Auditor, Teacher, Administration Executive, Storekeeper Executive, Program Officer, Environmental Officer, Administration Officer, and Clerk. Most job providers are in the private sector.

The study revealed that employers had given priority to management graduates from Business Administration, Marketing, and Accounting. It was noted that graduates who have been qualified in Estate Valuation and Supply Chain Management have fewer job opportunities in the job market of Sri Lanka. In addition, the job market prioritizes management graduates with professional qualifications and post-qualification experiences; knowledge and experience are the most important factors for management graduates when joining private sector organizations and especially for career mobility. Further, having a Master’s degree is an added advantage when obtaining a suitable job for management graduates.



This study identified that subject knowledge, various skills, and job-related experience are essential for most positions for management graduates. Most organizations have requested professional qualifications and experience, while some organizations require academic (bachelor's degree) and professional qualifications with work experience and others require professional or academic qualifications. Most private sector employers required working experience in the advised position with some soft skills. Employers specifically expect communication skills, critical thinking, leadership, a positive attitude, teamwork, and work ethics. Chandrakumar (2014) confirmed similar findings and concluded that being a management graduate is one of the strongest determinants in securing employment, and not having professional qualifications and required soft skills negatively impacts employability. Herath and Ranasinghe (2011) also noted that employers always desire professional qualifications over graduates since professionals are more qualified, skillful, and work-oriented than business graduates. However, further investigation is needed to validate this statement.

Based on the newspaper analysis, several core skills, namely, problem-solving, communication, numeracy, computer, and interpersonal skills, were identified as essential for having management positions, as presented in Table 01 (Please see Annexure 01).

As per the above table, the identified skills (Problem-solving skills, Interpersonal skills, Numeracy skills, Computer skills, Communication skills, and Other skills and Experiences) are discussed as follows.

### ***Problem-solving skills***

Problem-solving skills include good business understanding, critical thinking, excellent analytical skills, creative thinking and imagination, independent decision-making capacity, being hardworking and result-oriented, time management, along with task management skills, such as planning, proactive thinking, dynamic, self-motivated, efficient, and negotiation skills.

Problem-solving skills depend on the ability to use analytical and creative thinking skills to find solutions. Candidates should have the ability to tackle issues and come up with rational decisions. The most important set of skills for higher-level management positions is problem-solving ability. Similar findings were confirmed by Wismath et al. (2015); Harris and King (2015); Yang et al.

(2014); Finch et al. (2013); Jackson (2013); Wickramasinghe and Perera (2010) and Jackson and Chapman (2012).

### ***Communication skills***

Communication skills including exceptional written and verbal communication skills in English and the respective mother tongue, presentation skills, and proficiency in the Tamil language or vice versa for public sector employees. Graduates should improve their listening ability and need to be good listeners. Communication skills are essential in almost every job. Graduates will also likely need to be good listeners. Similar findings were confirmed by Scott (2019); Hanna et al. (2015); Jackson et al. (2014); Ramadi et al. (2016) and Osmani et al. (2015).

### ***Numeracy skills***

Numeracy skills refer to using, interpreting, and communicating mathematical information to solve real-world problems. Numeracy skills are computing, general mathematical knowledge, and application in practical contexts. That is crucial because employers predominantly use numeracy tests as a part of their graduate recruitment processes irrespective of the academic discipline (Durrani & Tariq, 2012).

Other numeracy skills include the aptitude for numbers, data analysis, and interpreting mathematical information for stakeholders. These numeracy skills are most important to the directors, managers, and assistant managers for elaborating the statistical information to the stakeholders such as shareholders, financial institutions, and government institutions.

Human resource managers consider numeracy as a highly needed skill to measure employability (Al-Mutairi et al., 2014; Poon, 2014) and graduates' job performance (Rosenberg et al., 2012).

### ***Computer skills***

Nearly every job in the contemporary business world and the public sector is required basic computer knowledge, and many positions demand intermediate to advanced computer skills. This can include sound computer literacy (MS Office), knowledge of spreadsheets, competency in accounting packages (Quick Books, ERP Systems, SAP), and email communication.

“For the efficient presentation of work, more importance is given to IT skills – word processing, searching, gathering, and sharing information” (Rosenberg et al., 2012, p.7). However, employers and academicians perceive business graduates to be strong in information management (Jackson & Chapman, 2012).

### ***Interpersonal skills***

Interpersonal skills refer to mentoring skills, teamwork spirit, and the ability to build a good business relationship, excellent leadership, interact with others, maintain relationships, or otherwise leave a positive impression on people. These human relations skills are essential to interact and making good relationships that will help to the main sound atmosphere within the workplace.

Though the discipline competencies from the degree and technical skills are the main requirements expected by employers, the graduates should demonstrate a broader range of skills and attributes, including teamwork, communication, leadership, critical thinking, problem-solving, and managerial abilities (Lowden et al., 2011). Similar findings were revealed by Archer and Davison (2008) and Ariyawansa and Perera (2006).

### ***Other skills and Experiences***

Working experience is another important factor that ensures employability. Lack of experience, language proficiency, and soft skills are one of the most prominent reasons for graduate unemployment. “Work experience” is used as an indication of ability to employers. The English language may be used by employers to screen the quality of higher education and thus signal a high level of productivity. Adding to the causes of graduates’ unemployment is their lack of soft skills which often curtails their performance in interviews as well as within their respective jobs. Many graduates were found to struggle with the lack of “soft skills” such as time management, communication, and creative thinking, or lacking the ability to work independently (Rheede, 2012).

If management graduates possess 3-5 years of experience, there is more possibility of finding career opportunities in the job market. Employers are mainly giving attention to previous experience where they have been trained in a similar capacity/role, and it is an added advantage to secure the job. One of the significant factors determining an employable graduate is training and experience but additional competencies such as English language proficiency,

IT skills, leadership qualities, analytical ability, teamwork, and interpersonal relations, are also expected by the employers (Ariyawansa, 2008).

The professional qualifications were considered necessary for the current employment of management graduates. A lack of training and required skills were the main barriers to obtaining the graduates' expected employability (Liyanage et al., 2017). Though the graduates can get employment after graduation with just having a degree, work experience, and professional qualifications to reach their destination, they need job training that suits their specialization, English proficiency, and the other employability skills expected by the employers.

### ***Job market requirement analysis***

In-depth interviews were conducted with selected human resource managers in ten (10) public and twenty (20) private organizations with unstructured questionnaires to identify job market requirements. Some interviews were conducted through face-to-face discussions by visiting those organizations. Other interviews were conducted via zoom meetings and telephone conversations due to the recent Covid-19 pandemic. When conducting in-depth interviews, questions such as qualifications considered in selecting management graduates for recruitment, most important reasons for selecting or rejecting management graduates in the recruitment, remarkable experiences undertaken by HR managers, when dealing with management graduates, common aspects about the graduates and the difference between graduates of state universities and private universities, were asked accordingly.

These managers are attached to various fields of industry, namely, manufacturing, trading, apparel, food, finance, insurance, banking, education, and administration. Most of them represent the Human Resource Manager or Head of HR of the selected organizations. Most managers possessed a bachelor's degree, and some have an MBA with working experience ranging from 5 to 31 years and 1 to 16 years of experience in their current position. The total number of employees of these organizations ranges from 20 to 11000; among them, some of them are graduates and represent management graduates.

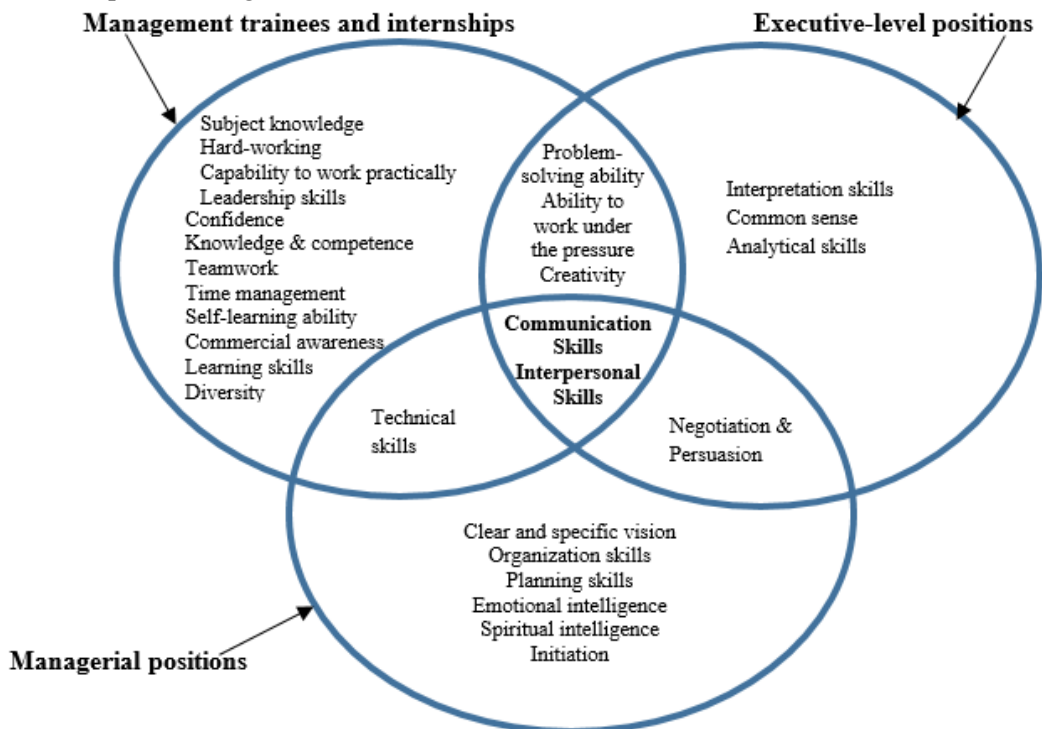
### ***Required Academic qualifications and Working Experience***

When recruiting management graduates as trainees and internships, the industry requirement is a degree or a degree with a class, professional experience, and

academic qualifications. For executive and managerial positions, the industry frequently expects from candidates a degree, while some organizations expect a degree with a class. Several organizations expect a degree with specialized knowledge (specialization). Work experience is crucial in being selected for the applied position.

**Required other skills**

Both public and private sector organizations recruit management graduates for various job positions, namely, internship, management trainee, executive, and junior managerial positions. Employers expect competent graduates who possess different abilities. As mentioned by all selected human resource managers, communication and interpersonal skills are common to all positions. Apart from that, both public and private sector employers expect graduates who have problem-solving skills, the ability to work with a team, the ability to work under pressure, creativity, technical skills, and negotiation and persuasion skills as depicted in Figure 1.



**Figure 1: Required Skills in the Job Market**  
Source: Field data

The above findings have been confirmed by previous research and theories especially, Consensus Theory, Human Capital Theory, and Career Anchor Theory. As per the Human Capital Theory, knowledge and skills are a vital part of the investment product. Eight themes in the career anchor theory influence an individual capability. As per the Consensus theory of employability discussed above, generic skills should be incorporated into the curriculums.

Bilsland et al., (2014) conducted a study to review the results of intern work supervisor evaluation feedback from a foreign university in Vietnam (FUV) over the initial three semesters (2010-2011) of its Work Integrated Learning (WIL) internship program to gain an understanding of both strengths and weaknesses of the interns in terms of their employability skill levels as evaluated by their workplace supervisors. This study highlighted important employability skills such as communication, interpersonal skills, teamwork, problem-solving, research and analytical skills, planning and organizing, technology, and lifelong learning skills.

Academic knowledge, soft, practical, and technical skill developments are the major factors that prepare an undergraduate for future employment (Ambepitiya, 2016). Zou (2008) conducted a study based on a workshop that the University of New South Wales, Australia organized to bring the leading industry professionals, students, and academics into the Master of Construction Project Management Program and defined "graduate attributes" from their perspectives and develop strategies that could assist students in better attaining. Accordingly, the need for students to develop analytical, problem-solving, teamwork, negotiation, communication and leadership skills, and interpersonal skills were addressed as graduate attribute guidelines (Zou, 2008).

Communication, time management, teamwork, working with people, working across cultures, project management, and business skills are some of the important professional skills required for graduates for their work (Nagarajan & Edwards, 2014). These authors investigated recent Australian Information Technology (IT) graduates' perceptions of how relevant their university studies were to the professional workplace.

Graduates had inadequate skills; they were ignorant of the work environment, with companies having to retrain their new graduate staff because university education was "more theoretical than practical" and they did not fulfill the companies' operational needs (Guinea, 2022).

### ***Factors affecting the success of the interview***

At the job interview, graduates who possess the following skills and competencies could succeed at the interview. These factors were identified through in-depth interviews which were conducted with selected human resource managers and thematic analysis with substantial descriptions were used to analyze the data.

Communication, presentation, and other soft skills - Communication skills are a vital attribute for being selected for managerial positions. Most of the graduates have the subject knowledge, but their communication skills are not up to the expected level. Because of that, they could not perform well in the interview. Especially, candidates should be fluent in speaking English and their mother language (Sinhala or Tamil). In addition, graduates may not get an employment opportunity if they fail to display their capability (show up themselves) at the interview, even if they have sound theoretical knowledge.

Leadership - Graduates should also possess leadership skills, teamwork, and confidence. The candidate's personality is an essential attribute for the success of the job interview. That is the way a person thinks, feels, and behaves. Personality holds moods, attitudes, and opinions and is most clearly conveyed in interactions with other people. It includes both inherent and acquired behavioral characteristics that distinguish one person from another and can be perceived in people's relations to the environment and the social group (Holzman, 2020). If a candidate has a good personality, there is a high possibility of success in the interview.

Practical knowledge - Practical knowledge is another essential attribute of employability. Some graduates have theoretical knowledge but lack practical knowledge. Graduates should be able to apply their theoretical knowledge to practical scenarios and should be able to understand business scenarios. This understanding could be obtained through their internship programs or by studying the organization before coming to the interview. There is a requirement to match the skills of graduates with the needs of industry. Graduates should develop not only skills but also practical experience (Singam, 2017).

Positive attitudes and the ability to work hard - Graduates do not like to start their careers from the bottom level and have higher expectations. Many graduates expect a higher salary at the beginning of their job and expect more benefits. Such attitudes need to be changed at their first interview; graduates

should show their willingness to accept any position, even with a lower salary. Awareness of the working environment and the organization's culture is another important aspect of being selected by the graduates at the interview. Once the candidate is recruited, he/she needs to adapt to the organization's culture. Otherwise, survival is difficult. Cultural awareness and ability to work with cultures is a skill which is expected from graduates but is often absent from graduate attributes (Nagarajan & Edwards, 2014).

Well, preparation for the interview - Some candidates face the interview without any preparation. Even though graduates have several educational qualifications, they are not aware of the nature, business, current trends, and important features of the organization when they face the interview. Hence, their confidence level is very low. Graduates are the country's future leaders, and they have to be ready for the modern changes in the industry (Ambepitiya, 2016).

The dress code is also another aspect that employers expect from the candidates. At the interview, candidates should be able to market their profiles, but many graduates do not know how to present themselves. Marketability of the candidates' profiles at the interview is an effective method for employment selection.

Clear knowledge of their career path - Most graduates do not explicitly know their career paths. They are not aware of the job market demand and supply and the job market requirements. Even though many jobs are available in the industry, graduates do not match their skills with job market requirements. It is essential to self-assess their skills and qualifications concerning current market trends and job market requirements. Graduates lacking industry experience is a key challenge faced by industry when recruiting the graduates (EEF- The Manufacturers' Organization, 2014).

## **Recommendations**

Based on the findings, the following policy measures are proposed to improve the employability of Graduates.

### ***Restructure the internship program with a careful design to acquire managerial skills and practical exposure***

Internship programs are essential as graduates could improve their practical knowledge and skills through these programs. Most of the degree programs at Sri Lankan State Universities have already included internship and training



requirements in their curricula in response to this issue. All stakeholders involved in the process are benefiting from this program's proper functioning. However, the duration of the internship program should be increased to gain adequate knowledge about the organizational cycle, culture, and industry environment. In addition to that training, organizations should assign the graduates to a specific job responsible for having effective industrial experiences during the training period.

The internship program must be designed collaboratively by academics and industry supervisors to acquire managerial skills and practical exposure. In addition to that, close supervision with feedback processes of the internship program must be strengthened.

There should be an industrial collaboration between the Universities and the public and private sector organizations to identify the job market requirements. Universities should invite top-level people in the industry to share their knowledge and experiences with undergraduates, and the sector could invite academics to have such industrial experiences. In that way, undergraduates could get more benefits from the internship programs while achieving the learning outcome of the Degree Program curriculum.

In addition to restructuring the internship program, universities need to initiate skill development programs such as enterprise training, and leadership.

***Revise academic curriculums commensurate with the job market***

There is a shortage of candidates for several positions in the job market. Thus, the university curriculum needs to be revised to address the emerging requirements of the job market. On the other hand, the curriculum needs to facilitate students to gain more practical knowledge. Practical knowledge has been identified as another essential attribute of employability. Although some graduates have theoretical knowledge but lack practical knowledge. To enhance such skills, curriculum revisions should be performed, including practical activities, case study learning methods, and problem-based/inquiry-based learning (PBL/EBL).

With industrial collaboration, Universities must identify job market requirements and these requirements should be included in the curriculums of the Degree programs. During undergraduate study, especially, the third and fourth years should be allocated for practical lessons. By conducting stakeholder

discussions, universities could revise curricula to improve the graduates' soft skills.

There is also a need to encourage entrepreneurship in the country, and graduates' entrepreneurial skills need to be strengthened. Universities should conduct periodic surveys to identify business opportunities and motivate graduates for self-employment accordingly. Career Guidance units of the universities could play major roles in this regard. In addition to that new courses for enhancing soft skills and positive attitudes of the graduates and curriculum review and development of the degree programs could be initiated.

***Obtain professional qualifications corresponding to the degree***

As per the analysis, it was revealed that most organizations have requested professional qualifications and experience, while some organizations require academic (bachelor's degree) and professional qualifications with work experience, and others require professional or academic qualifications. Management graduates should continue their undergraduate studies with professional education. The development of basic IT skills and English proficiency is not only the responsibility of universities. Graduates should improve these skills during and after their education. After graduation, management graduates should pay attention to commencing postgraduate degrees (M.Sc., MBA, and M.Phil.) or postgraduate diplomas for their career development.

**Implications and Conclusion**

This study examined the employability of Management Graduates in State Universities in Sri Lanka. Data were gathered from HR managers in private and public sector organizations and newspaper advertisements to identify the factors related to employability. HR managers' interviews were carried out to identify skills and qualifications requirements for improving employability, factors affecting the success of the interview concerning the management graduates of State Universities from the industry perspectives. An analysis of advertisements that appeared in selected newspapers was carried out to identify the job market requirements of both the public and private sectors.

Management Graduates should be well-equipped with various soft skills and theoretical knowledge. Five (05) core skills are identified per the newspaper analysis. Those are problem-solving skills, communication skills, numeracy skills, computer skills, and interpersonal skills. According to the industry

analysis, communication skills, interpersonal skills, leadership, presentation, and other soft skills such as a pleasing personality, ambition, integrity towards the organization, positive attitude, confidence, being a fast learner, and dedication are the skills which are in most demand by the job market. There is a high demand for leadership qualities, communication and presentation ability, teamwork, interpersonal relations, and a degree. Such attributes, practical knowledge, positive attitudes, hardworking characteristics, well-preparedness at the interview, and a clear understanding of the graduate's career path also impact one's employability in terms of the factors affecting the interview's success.

Revising curriculums of degree programs, and internship programs according to the job market requirements, restructuring the internship program with careful design, introducing generalized degree programs than are more specialized degree programs at the undergraduate level, ensuring job security, and obtaining professional qualifications corresponding to the degree are proposed as recommendations.

### **Limitations and Further Studies**

This study faced several limitations. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, physical contact with several respondents had not been made, but the discussions were undertaken through zoom platform and telephone conversations. This is one of the main limitations of this study. When conducting the industry analysis, the targeted number of organizations could not be covered due to the country's prevailing situation. It took considerable time to replace the communication networks during the pandemic situation, and therefore, the study has to be limited to only 30 organizations. The newspaper analysis was limited to two-weekend newspapers for three months. More diversified information could have been gathered if the number of observed newspapers could have been expanded.

Further studies could be undertaken to explore the employability of graduates of the Science and Engineering fields. Another study could be undertaken to explore strategies for improving employment opportunities for the country's graduates.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and publication of this article.

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**Table 1: Five-core Skills that essential to enhance the employability of Management Graduates**

N o	Advertised Position	Proble m- solving skills	Interperson al skills	Numerac y skills	Comput er skills	Communicati on skills	Other skills and Experiences
1	Business Coordinator					√	Matured person
2	Assistant General Manager		√			√	Working experience
3	Marketing Executives					√	
4	Project Mobilization Officer						Working experience
5	Finance Manager	√	√		√	√	Working experience
6	Sales Executives					√	Working experience
7	Accounts Executives						Working experience
8	Junior Project Coordinator				√	√	Working experience
9	Accounts Assistant						Working experience



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10	Environment al Officer					Working experience	
11	Senior Manager Finance	√	√		√	Working experience	
12	Sales Executive				√	Working experience	
13	Store Keeper (Executive Position)			√		Working experience	
14	Manager- Business Administrati on and Analysis	√			√	Working experience	
15	Marketing Executive		√	√	√	Working experience	
16	Sales Executives	√	√		√	“Can Do” attitude Positive attitude Ability to work under pressure	
17	Head of Reinsurance		√		√	Working experience	
18	Head of Marine		√		√	Working experience	
19	Head of Audit					Working experience	
20	Director of Studies		√			Teaching experience (Academic English, Business Management )	
21	Visa Clerk				√	Working experience	
22	Marketing Executives				√	Working experience	
23	Accountant			√		Working experience	
24	HR/ Administrati on Officer					Working experience	
25	Management Trainee	√	√				
26	Accountant			√		Working experience	
27	Assistant marketing manager/ executives	√				Working experience	
28	Accounts executives/ Accountant			√	√	√	Working experience
29	HR Executive	√	√		√	√	Working experience
30	Project Accountant				√	√	Working experience
31	Head of	√				√	Energetic

	Students' Affairs					professional with a high level of responsibility, dedication, competence, confidence, and Working experience
32	Deputy General Manager	√		√		Working experience, Ability to work under pressure
33	Accounts Assistant					Working experience
34	Branch Manager		√			Working experience
35	School Teachers (all subjects)					Working experience
36	Customer Relationship Manager	√	√			Working experience
37	Accounts Assistant					Working experience
38	Operational manager					Working experience
39	Employee relation assistant		√		√	Working experience
40	Accountant	√				Working experience
41	Marketing Executives				√	Ability to conduct marketing research and survey, Ability to generate business leads and convert them to opportunities
42	Post of Administrators			√	√	Working experience
43	Assistant manager export marketing	√			√	Working experience, attitudes
44	Senior international brand executive		√			Working experience

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45	Head of HR and administration	√	√	√	Working experience, positive attitude
46	Senior executive-credit and marketing	√		√	Working experience
47	executive-credit and marketing	√		√	Working experience
48	Head of Marketing				Working experience
49	Financial Controller		√		Working experience
50	E-commerce Specialist			√	Strong attention to detail and accuracy.
51	Junior ERP consultants				
52	HR manager			√	Working experience
53	HR Executive		√	√	Maintain consistency, focus, high-level accuracy, a sense of confidentiality, and Working experience
54	Accounts Assistant		√		Maintain consistency, focus, high-level accuracy, sense of confidentiality, working experience, and Ability to work independently and under pressure
55	Administrative Executive			√	Work independently with minimal supervision, Working experience
56	Regional Managers	√			Administration skills, Working experience
57	Branch Manager/ Assistant Branch	√			Administration skills, Working experience

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58	Manager Assistant manager-logistics	√	√		√	√	Working experience
59	Management trainee sales	√	√			√	Pleasing personality Positive attitude Ambitious Groomed for change with a learning mindset, Exceptional achievements in extracurricular activities
60	Regional head	√					Working experience
61	Group accountant					√	Working experience
62	Manager sales and customer relation		√			√	Ability to prioritize and multitask
63	Deputy General Manager-Operations	√	√	√	√	√	Working experience
64	Senior Manager-operations	√	√	√	√	√	Working experience
65	General Manager				√	√	Working experience
66	Project Accountant, Environmental and social safeguard specialist, Monitoring and evaluation specialist				√	√	Working experience
67	Procurement Officer				√	√	Understanding of National Procurement Guidelines, Working experience
68	Executive Director		√			√	Working experience
69	Executive Director		√			√	Working experience
70	Project Accountant, Environmental and social safeguard specialist, Monitoring				√	√	Working experience

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	and evaluation specialist						
71	Procurement Officer				√	√	Working experience
72	Executive Director		√		√	√	Working experience
73	Project management specialist						Working experience
74	Manager Finance				√		Working experience, Knowledge of circulars
75	Lecturer Probationary	-	-	-	-	-	-
76	Lecturer Probationary	-	-	-	-	-	-
77	Assistant Manager Marketing						Working experience
78	Head of digital marketing & IT- 01				√		Working experience
79	Lecturer Probationary	-	-	-	-	-	-
80	Lecturer Probationary	-	-	-	-	-	-
81	Program officer				√		Working experience
82	Admin officer				√		Working experience

Source: Newspapers