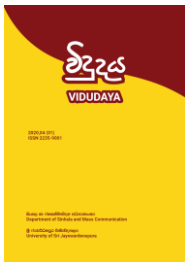

විදුදය

භාෂා, සාහිත්‍ය, සංස්කෘතික හා මාධ්‍ය අධ්‍යයන ශාස්ත්‍රීය සංග්‍රහය
සිංහල හා ජනසන්නිවේදන අධ්‍යයනාංශය, ශ්‍රී ජයවර්ධනපුර විශ්වවිද්‍යාලය

VIDUDAYA
Journal of Language, Literary, Cultural and Media Studies
Department of Sinhala and Mass Communication, University of Sri Jayewardenepura

2024, 03 (03): 01-09

ISSN: 3051-5424

Journal homepage: https://journals.sjp.ac.lk/index.php/vidudaya

A Study on the Social Contribution of Graduates in Public Universities of Sri Lanka

Chulan Lasantha K. Nawarathna

Department of Social Statistics
University of Sri Jayewardenepura
lasantha@sjp.ac.lk

Abstract

Sri Lanka continues to offer free education from grade one through the completion of a first degree, aiming to foster human capital as a key driver of socio-economic development. Despite the government's significant investment in maintaining this policy, households also allocate substantial resources to education. Graduates represent the ultimate output of this free education system, making it crucial to examine their social contributions to the nation. As education serves as a fundamental indicator of a country's development, the role of graduates has gained prominence in the current context of multiple crises. This study aims to assess the social contributions of Sri Lankan graduates in the face of shifting macroeconomic conditions. Data for the research were gathered through structured questionnaires and interviews with graduates from the Kurunegala district. A combination of quantitative and qualitative methods was employed to analyse responses from a sample of 500 participants. Most graduates (73.41%) are not members of any local organisation, society, or club, while a minority (26.59%) are. This suggests graduates often avoid societal involvement, likely due to busy schedules. Annual gatherings have a significant impact on social relationships, with a median value of 79.412, benefiting participants and enhancing their social esteem. However, the societal contributions of graduates remain insufficient, prompting a need for state universities and authorities to encourage greater involvement.

Key words: Graduates, Social Contribution, Public Universities, Free Education

1. Introduction

Sri Lanka, a vibrant democratic nation with a market-oriented economy, has steadily transitioned from being a low-income country to achieving middle-income status over the years. Renowned for its remarkable accomplishments in human development, Sri Lanka boasts one of the highest Human Development Index (HDI) rankings among developing nations. This progress has been significantly driven by the country's long-standing commitment to free education and healthcare, which have played pivotal roles in elevating health standards and socio-economic conditions.

The far-reaching impact of free education is evident across various indicators, including the impressive literacy rate, widespread school enrollment, and improved life expectancy. Additionally, the country has made substantial progress in reducing infant mortality rates, demonstrating its commitment to improving public welfare. Despite having a relatively low per capita income, Sri Lanka's investment in accessible education has been a transformative force, enabling its citizens to enjoy a higher quality of life and fostering a society that values knowledge and well-being.

The Sri Lankan education system is structured into five distinct levels, each serving a specific purpose in the academic and personal development of students. The first stage, primary education, encompasses grades 1 to 5 and lays the foundation for basic literacy, numeracy, and essential life skills. This is followed by junior secondary education, covering grades 6 to 9, where students are introduced to more advanced subjects and concepts. Senior secondary education, comprising grades 10 and 11, prepares students for the General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level (GCE O/L) examination, a crucial milestone in their academic journey. The collegiate level, which includes grades 12 and 13, focuses on preparing students for the General Certificate of Education Advanced Level (GCE A/L) examination, the results of which determine university entrance. Finally, tertiary education offers specialised academic and professional training, equipping students with the skills and knowledge needed for their chosen careers.

Admission to universities in Sri Lanka is highly competitive and is determined by the Z-score marks obtained in the GCE A/L examination. Currently, the country boasts 15 established tertiary education institutions, with several standing out for their academic excellence and contributions to various fields. Among these, the University of Colombo, the University of Peradeniya, the University of Ruhuna, the University of Kelaniya, the University of Sri Jayewardenepura, and the University of Moratuwa are particularly prominent. These universities produce graduates who excel across diverse disciplines, including Arts, Commerce, Science, Mathematics, and Engineering.

Higher education plays a pivotal role in fostering a knowledge-based society, as noted by Jayasundara and Niruba Sarath (2014). It is widely regarded as one of the most influential socioeconomic factors impacting academic achievement. The university environment itself is a complex ecosystem, shaped by various elements, including the field of study, class dynamics, grade point average (GPA) values, and opportunities for extracurricular engagement. These factors collectively contribute to the holistic development of students, preparing them to meet the demands of an increasingly complex and evolving global landscape.

The demand for highly educated individuals has increased significantly as countries strive to boost their economic growth. Higher education plays a pivotal role in achieving economic development (Beerkens-Soo, Maarja, Vossenteyn, Hans, 2000). By pursuing higher education, students acquire essential skills, attitudes, and knowledge that bridge the gap between theoretical concepts and practical applications, enabling them to contribute effectively to the labour market. Consequently, many nations prioritize providing education systems that closely align with industry demands and workforce needs (Beerkens-Soo, Maarja, Vossenteyn, Hans, 2000).

Moreover, higher education serves as a critical intellectual and creative resource for societal transformation. It addresses key challenges, such as ensuring the sustainability of natural resources, delivering accessible healthcare to an aging population, and revitalizing economic productivity across diverse demographics. This involves equipping working adults with advanced skills and knowledge, fostering core human values, and reinforcing social structures to guarantee justice, equity, and fulfilment for future generations (The National Centre for Public Policy and Higher Education, April 2008).

Unemployment significantly impacts a country's economic recession and can reshape its political structure. In developing nations, graduate unemployment remains a critical and urgent issue (Sanyal, C. Bikas, 1987). Sri Lanka has made notable progress by modernising its higher education policies to improve efficiency and align with global trends (Jayasundara, Niruba Srath, 2014). Despite these advancements, graduate unemployment in Sri Lanka has persisted as a serious challenge for nearly three decades, posing a major concern for the government. Currently, an estimated 20,000 graduates in Sri Lanka are unemployed (Weligamage, Susima, Siengthai, Sununta, 2003).

Traditionally, the public sector has been the primary employer of graduates from state universities, particularly those specialising in the arts. However, since economic liberalisation and subsequent structural adjustments, the demand for graduates in the public sector has steadily declined. In contrast, the private sector is emerging as the dominant force in the economy, expected to create new employment opportunities (Weligamage, Susima, Siengthai, Sununta, 2003).

A report by the Economist Intelligence Unit for the British Council (January 2014) highlights the urgent need for tripartite collaboration among policymakers, universities, and employers. Employers have expressed concerns regarding two critical skill shortages among graduates. First, there is an insufficient number of graduates equipped with the specialised skills required for high-growth sectors. Second, many graduates lack essential employability skills due to deficiencies in English proficiency, computer literacy, and soft skills such as communication and problem-solving abilities. Addressing these gaps is crucial to ensuring graduates are better prepared for the evolving demands of the workforce.

State universities consistently aim to provide students with both theoretical and practical knowledge, alongside essential skills such as English language proficiency, effective communication, teamwork, and other relevant competencies. For instance, universities in Sydney should focus on developing graduates to meet these expectations. They strive to enhance graduates' knowledge in areas such as mastering language within their field, organizing and communicating information effectively in both written and spoken English, and utilizing appropriate technologies to support these efforts. Furthermore, they emphasise critical thinking skills, encouraging graduates to exercise sound judgment, justify their decisions, evaluate themselves realistically, adopt problem-solving approaches, and think creatively and imaginatively.

In addition to intellectual development, universities foster personal skills such as lifelong learning, collaboration, and adaptability, along with attributes like tolerance, integrity, responsibility, ethical behaviour, and social awareness. Practical skills are also prioritised, including proficiency in information technology, the ability to collect, analyse, and report data, and the application of technical expertise relevant to their discipline (Weligamage & Siengthai, 2003).

Investing in the development of graduates represents a significant commitment of government resources, particularly as many individuals have access to free education. This substantial investment raises societal expectations for graduates to contribute to social development while establishing their own personal and professional stability. Graduates are also expected to fulfil social responsibilities that extend beyond their individual success. Therefore, it is essential to assess the extent of social contributions made by graduates

from state universities. This paper seeks to address this issue by examining a sample of graduates from the University of Sri Jayewardenepura residing in the Kurunegala district.

2. Methodology

This study is fundamentally an empirical investigation, relying on primary data gathered through a meticulously designed questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed to include an extensive array of detailed questions, aiming to capture diverse and comprehensive information that effectively supports the research objectives. The sampling framework was thoughtfully developed, striking a balance between resource limitations and the practicality of data management. The study targeted all graduates from public universities in Sri Lanka as its population, with a specific focus on graduates who completed their studies in the Kurunegala district. This focus was chosen due to the feasibility of obtaining personal contact information through the respective graduates, facilitated by the University Grant Commission.

The survey was structured as a tracer study, intended for periodic repetition over several years. To ensure consistency, the reference group was defined as graduates from national universities in Sri Lanka. Within this framework, individual graduates were selected and interviewed from specified categories (general or special), representing the broader reference group. From the study population of graduates in the Kurunegala district, a sample of approximately 504 individuals was selected, proportionate to the total number of graduates who had completed their studies. To achieve this, the study employed both stratified random sampling and convenience sampling techniques, ensuring a representative and manageable sample.

The analysis incorporated both quantitative and qualitative methods to derive meaningful insights from the survey data. Descriptive statistical techniques were utilised, including visual representations such as bar charts, pie charts, and histograms. Furthermore, four indices were constructed using Likert scale data obtained from the questionnaire responses. To facilitate robust data analysis, the researcher employed advanced statistical software tools, specifically IBM SPSS 22 and Minitab, for computerised processing and interpretation of the findings.

3. Discussion

Initially, it is useful to identify the demographic characteristics of respondents to understand their demographic and socio-economic backgrounds. Hence, Table 3.1 illustrates the demographic profile of respondents who have studied in the study. Essentially, the graduates surveyed come from diverse socio-economic backgrounds.

Table 3.1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Demographic Characteristic	**Summary Measurements / Percentage**
Gender	
Male	34%
Female	66%
Ethnicity	
Sinhalese	98%
Tamil	1%

Muslim	1%
Religion	
Buddhism	97%
Islam	1.5%
Christian	0.9%
Hindu	0.6%
Age	
Average	33 years
Standard Deviation	3.262 years
Marital Status	
Married	72.6%
Unmarried	27.2%
Widowed	0.2%
Main Economic Contribution	
Employed	92%
Business	5%
Self-Employment	1%
Farming	1%
Other	1%
Advanced Level Subject Stream	
Arts	72.22%
Commerce	16.87%
Mathematics	3.77%
Science	7.14%

According to Table 3.1, most respondents studied Arts stream subjects, which is reflected in a value of 72.22%. The second major stream for the Advanced Level in the first attempt is Commerce, which accounts for 16.87% of the value. The minority represents students from the Mathematics and Science streams, which have values of 3.77% and 7.14%, respectively.

Table 3.2: Employment Characteristics of Respondents

Employment Characteristic	Percentage
Employment Sector	
Government	87.79%
Private	12.21%
Job Base	
Permanent	91.01%
Temporary	8.99
Degree-qualified Job	
Yes	88.65%
No	11.35%
Income	
Average	10000
Standard Deviation	9.69

The vast majority of graduates are employed in the government sector, with a value of 87.79 percent, and a minority of graduate respondents are employed in the private sector, which accounts for 12.21 percent. The majority of respondents have permanent jobs, while the minority have temporary jobs, with values of 91.01% and 8.99%, respectively. This indicates that most graduates were seeking permanent employment in the government sector. The majority of the graduates were employed in the government or private industry as degree-qualified individuals in the posts for which they applied, indicating a value of 88.65%. The minority have obtained jobs without qualifying for a degree, which suggests a value of 11.35%.

Membership of different organisations in the living area of the respondent graduates

Table 3.3: Membership of different organisations

Membership	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	134	26.59
No	370	73.41

Source: Constructed by using surveyed data, 2019

The majority of graduates do not belong to any organisation, society, or club in their local area, representing a value of 73.41%. In contrast, the minority of graduates have membership in different organisations in their local area, indicating a value of 26.59 percent. This provides sufficient evidence that these graduates, for the most part, do not tend to get involved in societal scenarios, as they are often educated and busy with their schedules.

Participation in annual get-togethers

Table 3.4: Participation in get-togethers

Get together	Yes		No	
	Frequency	**Percentage**	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
School	145	28.77	359	71.23
University	140	27.78	364	72.22
Job	326	64.68	178	35.32

Source: Constructed by using surveyed data, 2019

Table 3.4 shows the participation in get-togethers of graduates who have organised these events in school, university, and at their jobs. The majority of graduates do not participate in school and university get-togethers, where these represent values, at rates of 28.77% and 27.78%, respectively. Since the majority of the graduates are employed and involved in job-related situations, they have participated in get-togethers arranged by their job peers, which represents a value of 64.68%.

The Effect of Annual Get-togethers on Social Relationships

Table 3.5: Distribution of the effect of annual get-togethers on social relationships

Summary Measures	**Value**
Minimum	0
Maximum	100
Median	79.412
Standard Deviation	16.423
Skewness	-1.0614

Source: Constructed by using surveyed data, 2019

Table 3.5 displays the distribution of the effect of annual get-togethers on social relationships. The minimum and maximum values for the distribution are 0 and 100, respectively. The median value for the effect of yearly get-togethers is 79.412, representing a higher impact on social relationships. This means that the majority of respondents derive benefits from these gatherings and gain social esteem, which also contributes to their well-being and survival. The standard deviation for the distribution of the effect of annual get-togethers in social relationships is 16.432, and the skewness is slightly negatively distributed, with a value of -1.0614.

4. Conclusions

The majority of graduates, accounting for 73.41 per cent, are not affiliated with any local organisation, society, or club in their respective area. This highlights a significant trend where most graduates refrain from actively participating in community-based activities. On the other hand, a smaller portion of graduates, representing 26.59 percent, hold memberships in various organizations within their localities. This disparity suggests that graduates often prioritise their professional and personal schedules over engaging in societal scenarios, possibly due to their educational background and busy work lives.

Interestingly, annual gatherings appear to play a pivotal role in fostering social connections among graduates. The median value for the impact of such events stands at 79.412, signifying a notable influence on building and strengthening social relationships. These gatherings provide tangible benefits, such as enhancing social esteem and contributing to the overall well-being of participants, which aids in their long-term survival and integration into society.

Despite these occasional benefits, it is evident that graduates, as a group, often fail to meet societal expectations regarding their contributions to local communities. This issue warrants attention from relevant authorities, including state universities, who should take proactive steps to empower graduates. By encouraging and facilitating greater involvement in community activities, institutions can help bridge the gap and enable graduates to play a more impactful role in societal development.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I gratefully acknowledge the funding for the research project: “An analysis on the academic performance of arts graduates and their actual socioeconomic performance (with reference to the University of Sri Jayewardenepura)” (Grant No. ASP/01/RE/HSS/2015/05) provided by the Research Council, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Sri Lanka.

References

Beerkens-Soo, M., Vossensteyn, H., Boezerooij, P., Huisman, J., Lub, A., Maassen, P., Salerno, C., & Theisens, H. (2003). *Higher education policy issues and trends: An update on higher education policy issues in 11 Western countries*. University of Twente, Center for Higher Education Policy Studies. ResearchGate+3SCIRP+3Twente Research Info System+3

Caldas, S. J., & Bankston, C. (1997). The effect of school population socioeconomic status on individual academic achievement. *The Journal of Educational Research, 90*(5), 269–277. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220671.1997.10544583

Caine, R. N., & Caine, G. (1990). Understanding a brain-based approach to learning and teaching. *Educational Leadership, 48*(2), 66–70.

Campbell, M. M. (2007). Motivational systems theory and the academic performance of college students. *Journal of College Teaching & Learning, 4*(7), 11–24. https://doi.org/10.19030/tlc.v4i7.1563

Crawford, C., & van der Erve, L. (2015). Does higher education level the playing field? Socioeconomic differences in graduate earnings (IFS Working Paper W15/24). Institute for Fiscal Studies.*5*(4), 380-412; **https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci5040380**

Crawford, C., & Vignoles, A. (2014). Heterogeneity in graduate earnings by socio-economic background (IFS Working Paper W14/30). Institute for Fiscal Studies. https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/WP201430.pdf

De Charms, R. (1977). *Pawn or origin? Enhancing motivation in disaffected youth*. *Educational Leadership*, 34, 6, 444-448. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ155110

Gulpinar, A. M. (2014). The principles of brain-based learning and constructivist models in education. *Educational Research and Reviews, 9*(21), 1797–1801. https://doi.org/10.5897/ERR2014.1896

Jayasundara, N. S. (2014). Higher education policy in Sri Lanka: Implementation in state universities. *Scientific Research Journal, 2*(2), 41–44. https://www.scirj.org/papers-0214/scirj-P021499.pdf

National Centre for Public Policy and Higher Education. (2008, April). *Measuring up: The national report card on higher education*, National Assessment of Adult Literacy; National Assessment of Educational Progress; National Survey of Student Engagement; SAT (College Admission Test), *http://www.highereducation.org/reports/reports.shtml*

Ministry of Higher Education. (2012). *National higher education strategic management plan of Sri Lanka: 2012–2015 midterm plan*. Colombo, Sri Lanka: Ministry of Higher Education, www.mohe.gov.lk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=104&Itemid=192&lang=en

Randiwela, P., & Herath, S. K. (2008). Improving relevance and quality of undergraduate education in Sri Lanka: The need for a change in public funding strategy. *International Journal of Innovation and Learning, 5*(3), 300–316. https://doi.org/10.1504/IJIL.2008.017364 ResearchGate+2ResearchGate+2

Rajapakse, D. (2014). *Employment opportunities and upward mobility for graduates of the Faculty of Arts, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka, Master's thesis, Norwegian University of Life Sciences, http://hdl.handle.net/11250/227023*

Sanyal, B. C. (1987). *Higher education and employment: An international comparative analysis*. ISBN-1-85000-252-5, The Falmer Press, Taylor & Francis Inc., 242 Cherry Street, Philadelphia, PA 19106-1906, UNESCO. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED295549.pdf

Sreekala, E. (2004). Academic achievement of students: Implementation of a theoretical model of personal causation in the classroom. *Library Philosophy and Practice (e-journal). 2160. http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libphilprac/2160*

Tomul, E., & Polat, G. (2013). The effects of socioeconomic characteristics of students on their academic achievement in higher education. *American Journal of Educational Research, 1*(10), 449–455. https://doi.org/10.12691/education-1-10-7

Wang, Y. (2008). The effect of cumulative social capital on job outcomes of college graduates. *The China Quarterly, 193*, 157–179. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741008000090

Weligamage, S., & Siengthai, S. (2003). Employer needs and graduates' skills: The gap between employer expectations and job expectations of Sri Lankan universities. *Sri Lankan Journal of Human Resource Management, 1*(1), 85–92.