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Research Article

## Challenges Faced by Arts Graduates in the Current Job Market: A Sri Lankan Perspective

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**Abstract.** Unemployment is a major issue for arts graduates in various countries, including Sri Lanka. In 2023, the Labor Force Survey reported an overall unemployment rate of 4.7%, with over 50,000 unemployed graduates, mostly from Arts and social sciences backgrounds in Sri Lanka. Therefore, the Sri Lankan government should develop appropriate policies to reduce unemployment. Consequently, research is needed to identify the factors and challenges faced by arts graduates in unemployment for policymakers. Numerous studies worldwide have explored the factors and challenges of unemployment among this group. The main objective of this study is to identify the challenges faced by arts graduates in the current Job market in Sri Lanka and to identify the causes of unemployment and propose recommendations to them. Quantitative, and Qualitative research method was used to achieve the objectives of the study, the primary data were collected from 120 Arts undergraduates, from the South Eastern, Eastern, Peradeniya, and Jaffna Universities through questionnaire and depth interview. Simultaneously, secondary data were gathered from books, research articles, University

Grant Commission report, National Audit Office report, Sri Lanka Labor Force Survey report, and websites. The collected data was analyzed using Microsoft Excel. The study found that major challenges for Arts graduates include abundant job opportunities in the private sector. However, issues such as the necessary knowledge and skills often lead to prolonged unemployment. Many Arts graduates anticipate government jobs due to the perceived job security and pension benefits in the public sector. Simultaneously, Arts stream graduates who have completed professional courses and internship training are more likely to secure their first jobs immediately after graduation compared to those who haven't undergone such training. Nevertheless, a significant challenge is the limited employment opportunities for Arts graduates, both in the private and public sectors. The study indicates the necessity for substantial structural reforms on both the supply and demand sides to enhance the employability and employment rates of graduates. The government must take a leading role in these reforms to generate more job opportunities for arts graduates, while higher education institutes should initiate significant changes in study programs to cultivate intellectually rich and highly skilled graduates in arts and social sciences.

**Keywords:** Arts Graduates, Current Job Market, Challenges, Sri Lanka, Unemployment

## INTRODUCTION

A major challenge faced by arts graduates is the inability to find a suitable job in the labor market commensurate with their degree. As per the International Labor Organization's definition, unemployment is the state in which individuals are jobless and have actively sought employment within the preceding four weeks. There are over 50,000 unemployed graduates in Sri Lanka, with most of them being arts graduates (Dayaratna Banda, Darmadasa, 2022). The number of arts graduates seeking employment in the current job market is increasing due to population growth, economic decline, inflation, the impact of Covid-19, changing technology, demand for highly skilled workers, global job competition, and illiteracy, which are the major causes of unemployment. Studies propose that these factors affecting unemployment in Sri Lanka are more influential.

Dickens and Lang (1995) asserted that several factors impact unemployment in Sri Lanka, and these reasons remain valid. The first reason they mentioned was "asymmetric capabilities", indicating an uneven relationship between the requirements of the labor market and the qualifications candidates should fulfill when applying for jobs in Sri Lanka. Secondly, "awaiting for queue" implies that Sri Lankans prefer private sector jobs over government sector jobs, leading them to wait for these opportunities in the job market. Thirdly, the slower increase in economic growth compared to labor force development is a contributing factor. Furthermore, the generation of jobs in Sri Lanka is limited to the private sector due to the impact of labor law.

University education serves as the primary mode of higher education in Sri Lanka. As depicted in Table 1, individuals with the highest educational qualification experience the highest unemployment rate, meaning they have to wait for an extended period to secure a job. While job opportunities are available for graduates in the private sector, predominantly for Science, Engineering, Management, and Commerce graduates, there are fewer opportunities for Arts graduates (Ariyawansa, 2008).

**Table 1:** Unemployed Count and Unemployment Percentage based on Education Level and Gender during the First Quarter of 2023 in Sri Lanka (Department of Census and Statistics, Quarterly Report on the Labor Force Survey, 2023).

Level of Education	Number of Unemployed person	Unemployment Rate (%)		
		Sri Lanka	Gender	
			Male	Female
Sri Lanka	399,999	4.7	3.4	7.0
Below GCE O/L	134,404	2.8	2.7	3.3
GCE O/L	86,077	5.0	4.3	6.4
GCE A/L & above	179, 518	8.3	4.7	12.0

In Sri Lanka, there is an insufficient number of job opportunities for highly educated individuals (Ariyawansa, 2008). The majority of graduates lack professional qualifications in comparison to their educational educational. The inclusion of professional qualifications, alongside educational qualifications, reduces the duration of unemployment (Dissanayake et al., 2010). Therefore, arts graduates face various challenges in the current job market. Investigating these challenges and providing recommendations for overcoming them adds significance to this research

### Research Problem

The Sri Lankan government allocates substantial annual budget for educational purposes, with a significant portion directed towards students pursuing higher education in universities. Graduates from Sri Lankan universities Face challenges in the current job market, where the competitiveness of the local employment sector is prominently highlighted.

The activities of universities prioritize enhancing students' knowledge, preserving cultural values, nurturing students' research skills, addressing societal issues, providing training, promoting career guidance, and ultimately creating job opportunities (Hommadi, 1990). In this context, 'Employability for Graduates' emerges as a noteworthy aspect derived from the university's activities. However, arts graduates confront substantial challenges in the current job market. This study aims to intricately explore the obstacles hindering the acquisition of employment in the industrial sector.

### Scope of the Study

1. Identifying the challenges faced by arts graduates in the current job market.
2. Proposing recommendation for arts graduates to overcome challenges and achieve success in the job market.

### Research questions

1. What are the challenges faced by arts graduates in the current job market?
2. What are the reasons for the challenges faced by arts graduates?
3. What are the solutions to address the challenges faced by arts graduates?

### **Significance of the study**

This research delves into the challenges faced by arts graduates in the current job market, arising from economic difficulties in Sri Lanka. By proposing a range of solutions, the study aims to contribute to the success and satisfaction of their professional lives, offering opportunities for advancement. Moreover, the study acquires significance as it explores the intricate challenges faced by arts studies graduates, aligning with the acknowledgment and initiatives from the government and education sector to address these issues in future contexts.

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Quantitative, and Qualitative research method was used to achieve the objectives of the study, the primary data were collected from 120 Arts undergraduates, from the South Eastern, Eastern, Peradeniya, and Jaffna Universities through questionnaire and depth interview. Simultaneously, secondary data were gathered from books, research articles, University Grant Commission report, National Audit Office report, Sri Lanka Labour Force Survey report, and websites. The collected data was analyzed using Microsoft Excel.

### **Literature Review**

Gunaratne, G.K.D.LL, and Jayasinghe, C.L. (2021) conducted a study titled "Factors Affecting the Unemployment Duration of Science and Arts Stream University Graduates in Sri Lanka." The research aimed to predict the factors influencing the duration of unemployment among science and arts stream graduates in Sri Lanka using survival analysis. It was determined that the Semi-Parametric Cox Proportional model is suitable for establishing the relationship between the time taken by graduates to obtain their first job and explanatory variables, considering factors such as gender and academic level.

Ariyawansa R, G. (2008). "Employability of Graduates of Sri Lankan Universities", the research delves into findings related to the employability of graduates in Sri Lanka. The study incorporates a literature review to understand various perspectives on the issue. It is found that there are numerous job opportunities for engineering, science and management graduates in the current job market, while fewer opportunities are available for humanities and social sciences. However, concerning the quality of degree programs, humanities and social sciences degree programs surpass even some programs offered by medical faculties in Sri Lanka.

In a recent study by Dayaratna Banda, O.G., and Dharmadasa, P.D.C.S. (2022), survival techniques were employed to estimate the unemployment duration of graduates in Sri Lanka. The study, titled "An Economics Analysis of Employability and Unemployment of Humanities and Social Sciences Graduates in Sri Lanka," identified that humanities and social science graduates face challenges in employability primarily due to a significant skills mismatch. Factors contributing to this mismatch include skills deficiencies, occupational immobility, geographical immobility, and technological changes. This research contributes valuable insights to the existing literature on the topic.

In the study conducted by Wijayawardhana, R.H.R.S. (2019) titled "Graduate Unemployment in Sri Lanka: Causes and Possible Corrective Actions," the primary objective is to examine the principal causes contributing to graduate unemployment in Sri Lanka and propose possible corrective actions to mitigate the crisis. Through this research, several factors causing unemployment among graduates in Sri Lanka have been drawn and analyzed, providing insights into the complexities of the issue within the existing literature.

In the analysis study conducted by Fernando, R.L.S., Kularathna, E.A., and Kumarasinghe, I.D.C.D. (2020) titled "Employability of Management Graduates of State Universities in Sri Lanka: Problems and Prospects" the research delves into the challenges faced by graduates in the employment field. This study systematically examines the level of employment and employability of management graduates from State Universities in Sri Lanka. Additionally, it identifies the problems and difficulties faced by management graduates in securing suitable jobs in the industry and proposes policy measures to enhance employability and address unemployment issues in Sri Lanka. This research contributes valuable insights to the existing literature on employability and challenges faced by management graduates.

While various studies have explored aspects of unemployment, including the duration university graduates wait for employment, there is a noticeable gap in the literature regarding specific research on the challenges faced by arts graduates in the current job market in Sri Lanka. This study seeks to address and fill this research gap.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The population of Sri Lanka is 21.3 million, and among them, 15.45 million belong to the age group of 15 and above, who are legally eligible for employment. However, only 8.31 million are currently employed. The country faces a significant challenge with an overall unemployment rate of approximately 262,999 among young men and women. The lack of appropriate job opportunities for these individuals could become a national issue in the future. Survey data also indicates that 38.4 percent of unemployed individuals have been searching for suitable jobs for over a year, with a notable representation of arts graduates. Despite an annual addition of about 200,000 persons to the labor force, the creation of 20,000 vacancies in the public sector and 120,000 vacancies in the private sector annually is insufficient to absorb all the unemployed individuals (National Audit Office report, 2020, p.01).

Nonetheless, as of 2023, the population of Sri Lanka has surged to 22.181 million (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, Q3, 2023). Concurrently, the unemployment rate has escalated to 399,999 (Sri Lanka Labor Force Survey report, 1Q, 2023). Of the total population of 22 million, there is an extremely high dependence, with about 8.31 million individuals currently employed. Due to the anticipated increase in the superannuated population in the future, there is a risk that this high dependency rate may become unsustainable. Therefore, it is identified that the only alternative is to immediately increase employment opportunities. According to labor economic surveys, the majority of Sri Lanka's population falls within a workable age. The demographic dividend in the population composition presents a significant opportunity for achieving rapid economic growth as a country. The national human

resources and employment policy emphasize the need for proper management of this demographic advantage. Specifically, arts graduates, as characterized by various daily media sources, and students studying under the Arts stream but unable to secure university admission, face unemployment challenges (National Audit Office report, 2020, p.01).

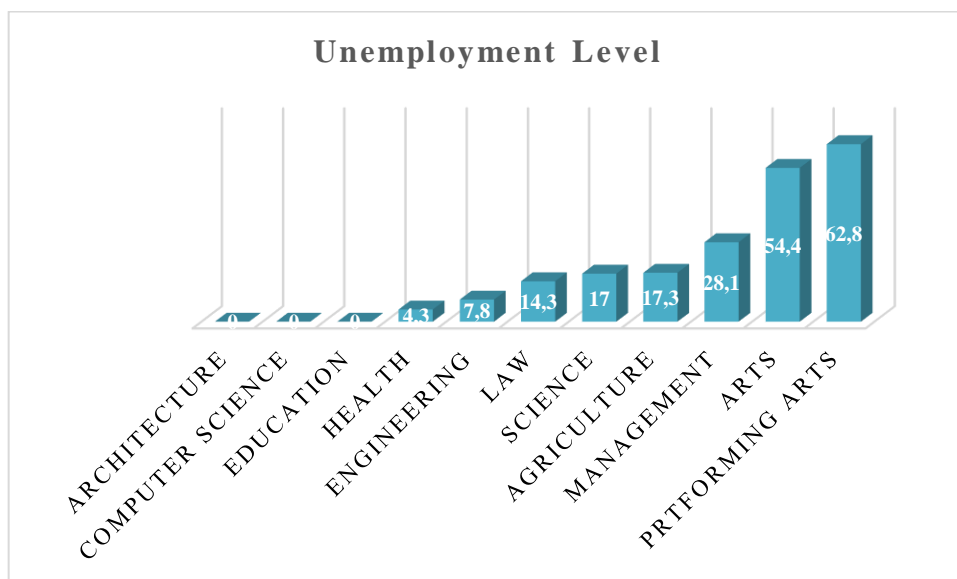
Art must exist in all social systems worldwide, and its existence is indispensable for human society. Consequently, there is a compelling need to make a significant contribution at the university level for the development of literary figures, actors, cinematographers, musicians, and artists. It is indisputable that the arts stream plays a crucial role in fostering individuals with aesthetic thinking, providing valuable service in this regard.

However, education in a developing country like Sri Lanka, which follows an economic growth rate as low as 1.3% (Q3, 2023) and an unemployed labor force of 4.7%, must be oriented towards economic development. The imbalance between education and employment needs to be minimized. Degree courses in Arts have not been periodically revised even in universities, and there are limited opportunities for enhancing English language proficiency, information technology, and soft skills development.

### Unemployment Levels of Arts Graduates

A 2016/2017 survey by the University Grants Commission showed that, for many graduates across different subjects, unemployment is a significant issue. Specifically, over 50% of Arts graduates face unemployment as a notable concern.

**Table 2:** Investigation study report on graduates conducted by the University Grants Commission in the years 2016 – 2017.



As previously stated, despite the lower employment rate of arts graduates in the current job market, their numbers are increasing at a higher rate compared to other graduates.

### Unemployed graduates

A significant portion of graduates, comprising 40% of men and 18% of women, experience a 2 to 3-year job search period after completing their education. Among the unemployed, 50.4% are Arts graduates, with a notable 83% representing women. The high enrollment of women in university Arts programs contributes significantly to this trend (National Audit Office report, 2020).

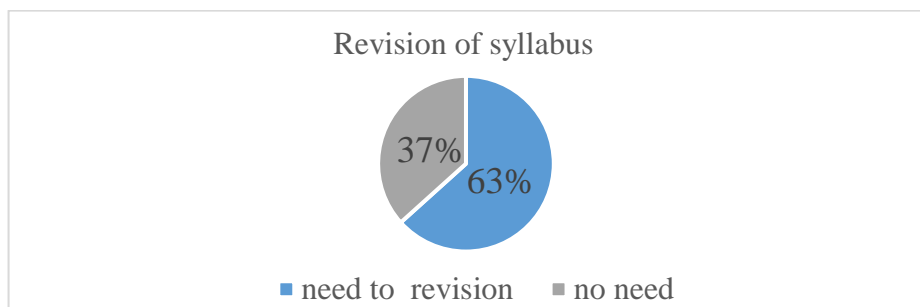
Further analysis reveals various factors contributing to graduate unemployment, including lack of work experience, difficulty in securing suitable employment, absence of professional qualifications, limited communication with employers, aspirations for government positions, pursuit of further studies, personal disinclination towards employment, and insufficient communication skills.

### The attitudes of arts undergraduates regarding jobs and challenges currently faced in the job market.

The following findings emerged from the test conducted regarding matters associated with the questionnaire and interviews of 120 Arts undergraduates from the South Eastern, Eastern, Peradeniya, and Jaffna Universities.

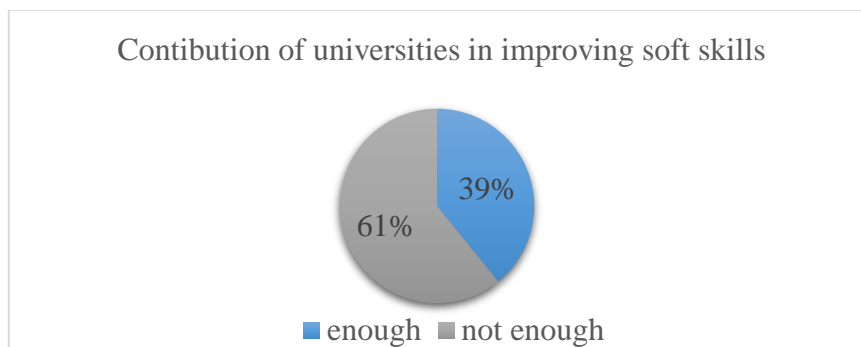
1. When questioned about the revision of the syllabus, 63% of students answered that it needs adjustment to align with the job market

Table: (3)



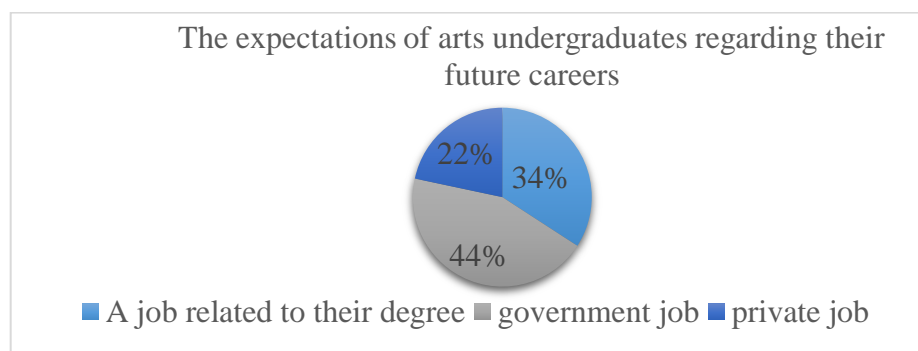
2. When questioned about the contribution of universities in improving soft skills, only 39% of students stated that the University's assistance with skills such as computing, English language, and leadership is insufficient. The remaining students found it to be sufficient.

**Table: (4)**



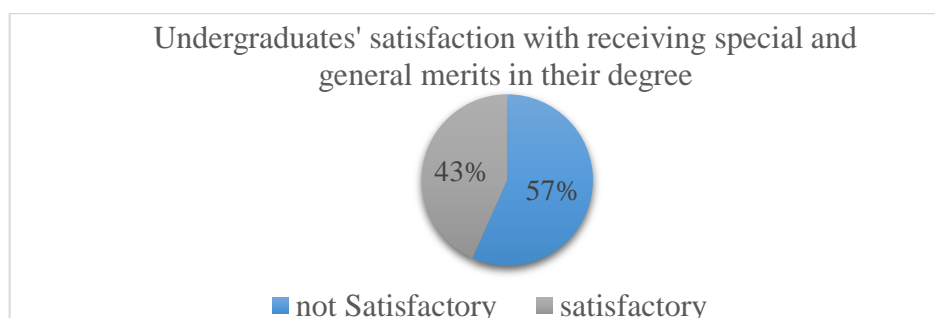
3. When questioned about their future careers, 34% of Arts undergraduates expected a job related to their degree upon graduation. Meanwhile, 44% anticipated government jobs, and 22% foresaw jobs in the private sector.

**Table: (5)**



4. When questioned about their satisfaction with receiving special and general merits in their degree, 57% of Arts undergraduates expressed dissatisfaction with the conferment of such merits.

**Table: (6)**





5. 82 percent of Arts undergraduates stated that they lack professional qualifications alongside their educational qualifications due to a shortage of funds for further studies. All of them expressed the belief that acquiring professional qualifications, in addition to their educational qualifications, would enhance their chances of securing a job in current job market.
6. Based on research surveys with Arts undergraduates through questionnaires, 54% believe that their degree courses do not provide the necessary Information Technology and English knowledge to align with the demands of the job market.
7. When questioned about the role of internship training in obtaining jobs in the current job market, all Arts undergraduates answered that it helps them secure jobs sooner. At the same time, 66 percent of Arts undergraduates expressed that the existing training period is insufficient and it needs to be at least 6 months.

The research conducted by the University Grants Commission has revealed that graduates with internship training find employment more easily. Accordingly, approximately 74.3 percent of graduates who underwent internship training had secured employment, while only 53.6 percent of graduates who did not undergo internship training found employment (University Grand Commission, 2018)

### **The perspective of graduates regarding university education.**

The researchers from the University Grants Commission reported that, when considering the alignment of knowledge from University education with the labor market and the perception of graduates in the labor market, 44.7% of Arts graduates find their degrees lacking coherence with their jobs. Generally, an Arts degree is not considered a foundational qualification for employment. Additionally, the report highlighted that 84% of graduates need the following skills to secure a job: English language skills, communication skills, presentation skills, and leadership skills (University Grand Commission, 2018)

### **CONCLUSION**

The aim of this study is to explore the challenges that arts graduates face in current job market and the reasons behind them. The major challenges for Arts graduates include plentiful job opportunities in the private sector. However, issues such as the requisite knowledge and skills often result in prolonged unemployment. Many Arts graduates anticipate government jobs due to the perceived job security and pension benefits in the public sector. Simultaneously, Arts stream graduates who have completed professional courses and internship training are more likely to secure their first jobs immediately after graduation compared to those who haven't undergone such training. Nevertheless, a significant challenge is the limited employment opportunities for Arts graduates, both in the private and public sectors.

### **Recommendations**

The academic courses offered by universities and higher educational institutions need updating to better align with international standards and

employment needs. Strengthening programs that enhance course quality, supported by provisions from the World Bank and other agencies, will further improve the relationship between educational institutions and industries.

Creating an authorized organization to oversee and coordinate among the University Grants Commission, government institutions, and non-governmental organizations will help plan university graduate courses to suit the job market requirements.

Universities should take action to reduce the gap between what students learn and what employers expect in job opportunities. Including internship training programs, supported by employers, is essential. Additionally, all students should be trained in common, soft, life, and positive skills to meet job market demands effectively.

Promote connections between local and foreign universities so that students, lecturers, and researchers can gain ongoing international experiences. Encourage better collaboration among local universities, technology and vocational education institutions, industries, and vocational institutions to enhance student learning outcomes and employment opportunities. This collaboration helps distribute resources effectively within the country.

Universities should be able to produce graduates with global skills in Information and Communication Technology to enhance its practical use and contribute to Sri Lanka's economy through international involvement.

Currently, the government's funding for higher education in Sri Lanka is low, considering international and historical standards. This has led to slow and inadequate improvements in modern facilities at universities. As a result, the training functions for employment in these institutions have not been successful, leading to a decline in the quantity of human resources. Internal management and student unrest issues have further intensified these challenges. It's important to pay attention to this situation.

It's evident that there are more graduates in Arts and culture than needed in the job market. To address this in the short term, conduct surveys to identify subjects with job opportunities and adjust curriculums accordingly.

Being aware of the courses graduates have taken is crucial when establishing hiring processes for public, private, and non-government sectors. This necessitates the design of a suitable monitoring system.

Policy makers, under the Ministry of Education and (National Policies and Economic Affairs), need to create a national higher education policy. This policy should focus on producing skilled intellectuals and professionals to meet the overall workforce needs. It should also ensure that graduates from various sectors and fields, generated annually through the university system under the University Grants Commission, have access to meaningful job opportunities.

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