

COVID – 19 AND ITS EFFECTS ON ARTS BASED GRADUATES’ EMPLOYABILITY – A SRI LANKAN PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The spread of COVID – 19 pandemics has created many complications in the lives of people globally. One of the main impacts of this pandemic is increasing unemployment. In Sri Lanka, the main sufferers of unemployability are the graduates, and most specifically the Arts based graduate. There are many reasons for such problems. This article studies what are the main root causes contributing to this unemployment issue to the Arts based graduates, such as virtual teaching and learning, government policies, administrative procedures in the state university system, and personal issues of the students and the teachers. The virtual teaching and learning process makes the entire system havoc right from the schools to the universities that the main intention becomes to complete the syllabus, forgetting sharing and disseminating of knowledge. Further, this becomes a big hurdle to the students at various levels such as acquiring proper gadgets, internet connectivity, timings, etc. Government policies and university administrative procedures also play a major role in the unemployment issues of Arts-Based graduates. Also, this article reveals the problems faced by visually challenged students under these new normal circumstances. They face different kinds of problems apart from the usual undergraduate such as using gadgets, getting materials from teachers and peers, and writing examinations and assignments.

Keywords: Covid – 19 Pandemics, Effects, and Arts Based Graduate, Unemployability, and Knowledge

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The effect of COVID – 19 was very high throughout the globe in almost all the fields, such as health, education, economy, etc. Education was one of the significant fields that had severe consequences by the sudden closure of educational institutions due to this pandemic period. The 2021 Annual Report of the Central Bank of Sri Lanka says: “The increased departure of students for higher education and the significantly high foreign exchange outlay that it entails highest the need to urgently address issues pertaining to the dearth of domestic higher education opportunities” (Harischandra). This is one of the issues that higher education in Sri Lanka is facing, particularly after the COVID outbreak.

Further, the unemployment rate had drastically dropped throughout the globe due to the spread of COVID – 19 since many countries (almost all the nations) were locked down, except for essential services. This led many to lose their jobs and the impact is still prolonged, especially in the private sector. The main impact on the locked down is not only unemployment but also under-employment persists mainly among the graduates. Also, it must be noted that many undergraduates started working since they did not find their respective universities had closed and for survival, they had to seek some kind of jobs like daily waged jobs. This was clearly seen in the Sri Lankan universities, when the universities re-opened after the normalcy returned, undergraduate students were dodged to attend lectures. However, according to Harischandra (2022) on the Central Bank of Sri Lanka Annual Report - 2021, the unemployment rate has declined to 5.1% in 2021 from 5.5% recorded in 2020. The above statement is a questionable one since it is obvious that many are unemployed due to the COVID effect in the years 2020 and 2021. Also, it must be added to the Sri Lankan scenario that the country was almost closed in the year 2019 after the Easter attack in Sri Lanka.

Sri Lankan education system is somewhat different and complicated from that of other countries. Free education is given to every citizen of the country from grade one to graduation in the State universities. Further, the Sri Lankan government supports undergraduate the low-income families students in the name of Mahapola Higher Education Scholarship (Mahapola) and Bursary to further their education uninterrupted. The expectation of the government is to make the literacy rate higher among its citizen. Under the Mahapola scheme students are paid at the rate of Rs. 5,000/- for General Scholarships and Rs. 5,050/- for a merit scholarship per month per student, and under the bursary scheme the government grants worth Rs. 4000/- per month per student. According to the University Grants Commissions' Annual Report (2018), 1268 and 535 students had received Mahapola and bursary assistance respectively. That is, this amounts to the government has spent Rs. 1, 803 million in the year 2018. According to the report – 2019 submitted to the parliament, the government had granted a total of 14,957 scholarships to undergraduates (Lalith Athulathmudali Mahapola Higher Education Scholarship Trust Fund - 2019 Annual Report & Accounts, 10).

According to the Auditor General's Report for 2019, quoting the survey conducted by the University Grants Commission in 2016/2012, the unemployment rate of the Arts graduates and Performing Arts is 54.4% and 62.8% respectively (8). Various reasons have been given for such drawbacks and the Government of Sri Lanka now is trying to take some steps to get away from this Arts stream undergraduates' unemployment, including "streamlining the curricula." Quoting Committee on Public Accounts (COPA), the ECONOMYNEXT states "more than half of university Arts graduates are unemployed" (March 25, 2021).

Further, the spread of COVID – 19 had increased the unemployment rate from 4.8 in 2019 to 5.5 in 2020. This has broadened on the Arts based students as well.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

COVID – 19 lockdowns created much confusion globally, including in higher education. Many of educational institutions, both schools,s, and universities, switched to the virtual

mode of teaching-learning methods. Though each and every field got affected by this pandemic situation, the effect on education has a longer effect since it will have consequences in the future. The reason is very simple education imparts knowledge that will give benefits in all the fields such as economics, society, and education itself.

Alam (2021) states: "Sustainable higher education refers to a university's ability to meet a particular industry's demand. University and industry tend to be isolated from each other – a common proposition often asserted to describe the relationship between HE and the job market." This is true and it must be accepted by all graduates and higher educational institutions. Further, it must be admitted that graduates do not process the required soft skills that employers require. These types of "extra" knowledge must be acquired by the graduates themselves, and it is part of the duties of universities to deliver such kinds of extra knowledge – which we say "soft skills."

Usually, the Sri Lankan university (or educational system) requires 80% of attendance from each student to be qualified for sitting for the final examination. The purpose of expecting 80% attendance is not to give (or rather say disseminate) knowledge, but also to train students in many ways such as leadership, teamwork, self-learning, communication skills, etc. This part of the training will not be acquired by the teaching-learning process alone, but by looking at their teachers, co-students, etc. The COVID – 19 pandemic and the subsequent closure of the universities blocked such kind of training. Hayashi, R. et al (2022) reinstate such as; "providing greater provision of courses in certain areas, delivered in person or online, might be able to ease student concerns. Students considered English, information technology, and soft skills in communication as the three best skills to increase job prospects after graduation (11)." This part is very much lacking during and after the pandemic closure of the universities since many teachers in the university sector in Sri Lanka try to complete their syllabus rather than giving such training.

Further, the virtual kind of learning, especially in South-Asian countries like Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, India, etc., is new to the educational system and this led the students to become lethargic and ineffective. Alam (2021) further declares that using such virtual platforms for the learning process becomes a difficult one in developing nations (5). It is true that the developing nations such as South-Asian countries did not come to the expected standard of technologies for using such virtual platforms, and COVID – 19 lockdowns made it compulsory where the expected imparting of knowledge and skills are not at all delivered perfectly, or partially. Hayashi, R. et al (2022) reinstate this statement where long power cuts and unstable internet connectivity are some of the hurdles that the Sri Lankan university students faced during the virtual learning process during the COVID – 19 pandemic.

Students also feel the problems in the employment process versus the university education due to the COVID – 19 pandemic. Certainly, there is gap between these two sectors: employment and university education. It is the duty of the universities; particularly the state universities in Sri Lanka (of course almost all the universities in Sri Lanka are state-owned) must fill the gap at this juncture.

3.0 OBJECTIVES

The objective of this study is to check whether there are actually state universities in Sri Lanka that cater to the job market after the COVID – 19 pandemic.

4.0 METHODOLOGY

This is an empirical and holistic study and the research is carried out based on the available data and subsequent research done in this respect.

5.0 NATURE OF ARTS-BASED STREAMS

5.1 Choosing Arts Stream in the GCE (A/L)

In the Sri Lankan high school system, mainly in the GCE (A/L), there is a myth among the school students, parents, and the teachers themselves that the Arts based subjects are lower in the ladder whereas Science-based subject is superior; such as Biology and Mathematics stream. This looking down usually continues to the university level as well, especially among the students. Further, in the schools, students who score higher grades in their GCE (O/L) subjects tend to choose Science based subjects such as Biology and Mathematics. Sometimes students who fail in GCE (O/L) subjects like mathematics or science are granted a pardon by the school administrator stating that the failed subjects could be achieved (at least with a minimum pass) in the following year and allowed to continue their GCE (A/L) subjects in the Arts stream. Also, many of the above group quite often forget that the selection for the state universities for the Arts stream by the government is island wide whereas the selections for the Science stream is district wise, grounded on the Z-score.

Whilst looking at the students who choose the Arts stream very often choose subjects that are easy to score higher Z-score in the GCE (A/L) examination. This is because the students think of employment opportunities if they are not selected for the University. However, they do not even choose subjects that have high employment scopes, rather they think of passing the GCE (A/L) examination. When it comes to university selection, though it is an island-wide selection, the percentage of scoring university admission is almost equal to that of other GCE (A/L) streams. The following table shows the university entrance into the GCE (A/L) in 2020:

Table - 01: Statistics of GCE (A/L) Examination Performance – 2020

Under New Syllabus			
Stream	No. Sat	Eligible for University Entrance	Percentage
Bio Science	39,310	21,614	54.98
Physical Science	34,389	20,999	61.06
Commerce	57,773	40,057	69.34
Engineering Tech.	20,210	12,484	61.77
Bio-System Tech.	10,980	7,652	69.69

Source: Department of Examination, Performance Report - 2020

The above table clearly indicates that the “myth” about the Arts stream is a false one. Another important matter is that the above statistics indicate that the overall Arts stream eligibility for university entrance is made island-wide, than the other streams.

5.2 At the University Level

When taking the scenario in the state universities, students entering the university aiming for a degree do not have any idea about or the opportunities they have in front of them. This is applicable for all streams, but specifically for the Humanities and Social sciences. Further, the average age of the students who enter universities is 21. Due to various delays (such as natural and man-made disasters, students/staff agitations, etc.), the average pass out of the undergraduates takes between 4 and 5 years. This makes the students enter into the world of work at an average age of 26, whereas in the other parts of the world is approximately 22 years for an undergraduate.

Then the choice of subjects by the undergraduates becomes another issue, that most of the students act almost the same as that of the school system, selecting subjects that they can cross over easily. Other sets of students choose subjects that seem to have more employment opportunities such as sociology, and education – aiming to be teachers or non-governmental sectors. This kind of choice makes the system more complicated as more the universities supply than the expected demand. Such undergraduates become unemployed or under-employed for other kinds of jobs. But there are many subjects untouched by the students which have more employment opportunities such as languages, history, economics, political science, etc.

6.0 THE COVID – 19 AND ITS IMPACT

Under the COVID – 19 pandemic background and its impacts, many industries face many challenges, mainly financial instability, both government and private sectors. This impact is affecting employment as well and the key sufferers include the current undergraduates.

Now let us have a look at how COVID – 19 pandemic outbreaks further delay the passing out of the undergraduates and how they increase unemployment among the Arts based undergraduates:

6.1 Virtual Learning Effects

Though many of the teachers (including school teachers) are self-satisfied that they are teaching through virtual modes and students also want to complete their “syllabus” in order to complete their degree program. And it should also be looked at the instructions given by the government through UGC to conduct the lectures and examinations via virtual mode, which all the universities “blindly” follow. No one look at this as a serious issue, but to “complete the syllabus” not to “disseminate knowledge” per se. The university has a system that the full-time students’ attendance at the lectures must be minimum of 80%, and students are not allowed to work during the course of the study program. This law is in force that “the university education is a kind of training – not just lecture and impart the so-called

knowledge.” This “training” part is missing in the virtual mode of teaching-learning activities and the students pass out “successfully” with a minimum of “knowledge.” This incomplete knowledge will have an impact on searching for jobs.

Many students complain that they do not have sufficient internet coverage due to geographical locations, timings, unsupported gadgets, etc. These types of technical shortcomings affect the teaching-learning process and this leads to unequal delivery of knowledge. To add more to the above, teachers take this opportunity for granted and conduct lectures to their suitability, not to the convenience of the students. Students get tired due to this when they look at the LED/LCD devices for a long time. Valerie Strauss (2020) states that an “undetermined amount of time” may lead to complexities among students. This furthers stress, both to the teacher and the student, and less time is spent disseminating knowledge, which leads to many problems while searching for jobs.

Face-to-face interaction is missing in virtual teaching-learning whereas students miss interactions among themselves and with the teachers. This may lead to a lack of “teamwork” and students would tend to work individually which would be the main drawback for employment that the employers expect the most. This is a real shortcoming that will end up in a lack of sharing and this would have a huge impact on job-seeking. Further, there is a policy by the government, that on-job training must be incorporated into the curricula for a “better” future of the students and in the virtual system this is missing and students are unable to acquire the expected on-job training.

Hayashi, R. et al (2022) state the virtual learning process as; “... students from low-income families have suffered the most. The students from non-state higher education institutions come from relatively well-off households and can access better devices and the internet for online higher education (9).” It is true that most of the students in the state universities in Sri Lanka come from middle or lower-middle income families and they are unable to get such “better” or “higher” internet facilities to follow the online virtual mode of learning, which again blocks proper knowledge dissemination. This further increases the learning gap between economically advantaged and disadvantaged students.

6.2 Government Policies – Minimum Working Capacity – the Roster System

The present Sri Lankan government’s policy (Public Administration Circular: 02/2021(II) and Establishments Circular Letter No.13/2021 by the UGC) is to minimize the human resource (especially it is imposed on the non-academic staff) to maintain social distance to avoid spreading of the disease. This makes a major impact on the student's employability since students who complete their degree are unable get some required certificates, letters, information, etc. on time. This government policy becomes a hurdle that if a particular staff is not be available (due to the “roster” system) and can be present on another day whereas the particular student may not be in a position to obtain her/his required certificates or letter on time. This further delays the requirement(s) of the employer and there are a lot of chances of missing the job opportunity.

6.3 Administrative procedures

Due to a lack of physical working capacity and a limited number of gatherings imposed by the government's health guidelines, the statutory boards of the universities which makes policies are unable to be conducted. This makes delays in such procedures as conducting lectures, conducting examinations, releasing examination results, and obtaining certain relevant information. This certainly influences the student's employability, such as delay in conducting examinations and releasing of results on time. Hayashi, R and Matsuda N (2020) state as follows the impact of COVID – 19 on the job market in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh: "most citizens understand and even feel the impact of COVID – 19 on the labor market personally, but policymakers, particularly in developing countries, have struggled to articulate the degree of COVID – 19 impact on labor demand with reasonably large data (7)."

Furthermore, this has another impact whilst marking the answer scripts of the students. Academic staffs who are actively involved in marking may not be in a position to enter their marks and finalize the results due to the lack of human resources in the universities. This has more impact on the Arts based graduates since the number of students intake every year is huge and unimaginable for the working capacity of an ordinary lecturer and the imposed work norm for the academic staff. This further gives more impact on releasing the results on time and the employability of the graduates.

6.4 Visually Challenged Students

This is a major issue while switching to the virtual mode of teaching and learning activities. In the state universities, Arts based faculties mainly admit visually challenged students through the UGC. The said students until the COVID – 19 outbreaks did not have any problems in attending their lectures, writing their examinations, and getting into employment. They were treated equally along with the other students. The virtual teaching and learning activity has made them separate from the normal students. These students are unable to access the gadgets that are used for such teaching and learning. For instance, when a normal student gets difficulties in the internet connections, she/he can move to other places and continue the virtual mode of learning, whereas these visually challenged students are unable to do so. Further, at the physical lectures, the visually challenged students share many materials with their batchmates (tables, notes, figures, etc.) apart from their usual recorded materials. This becomes another issue that these students are unable to share such types of materials.

Conducting examinations via virtual mode to visually challenged students is another issue. They cannot be treated like other students, and in the present scenario, these students have to be taken physically to write their examinations. This is also applicable for the formative assessments as well. Then the examinations (both formative and summative) have to be conducted separately later which further delays they're passing out and getting their graduation.

This again led to gain lack of knowledge by only these students who later become underprivileged ones. This would definitely play a major role in their employment and they would further suffer from unemployment issues.

6.5 Personal issues (Students & Staff)

This has more to be elaborated on in various aspects.

6.5.1 Quarantine and Isolation

Due to the spread of COVID – the 19 pandemic disease, students and staff are forced to be quarantined or self-isolated once they are identified with COVID – 19 with positive results. If a student falls into this situation and is taken to the COVID treatment center, she/he will not be in a position to appear for examination or interview (both physically and virtually) and this makes a delay. This situation will definitely affect the employability of the student. This has more effect on the Arts based graduates since the number is larger compared with the other students in other streams of study. Also, in the competitive job market, the such student has to suffer a lot to get employment.

6.5.2 Lethargy

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2021) defines lethargy as “abnormal drowsiness” and “the quality or state of being lazy, sluggish, or indifferent.” Here the second definition fits more to discuss.

First, if we take the teachers’ lethargy, not many, but some are lethargy to teach virtually, for many reasons. The foremost reason is that the teachers take it for granted and try to lecture according to their convenience, not looking at the conveniences of the students. It occurs mainly in the “mood” of the teachers that create a kind of sluggish nature and whenever the teacher gets her/his “mood” then they awake and tries to teach. Further, when they teach via virtual mode, they encounter many obstacles, mainly when they “work from home.” Her/His family becomes the main disturbance and such a teacher decides to handle the lecture “later” at the university, from her/his own cabin. These kinds of disturbances become lethargic and delay the teaching process. The second one is that some are reluctant to teach via virtual mode, and this makes things move slowly.

Then the lethargy nature of the students. Most of the students while in the virtual mode of teaching appear on the screen without video mode on. However, they do not give any attention to the lecture, rather they go away or sleep while the teaching process is going on. This is another kind of lethargy by the students. This un-attentive nature makes the students get less knowledge and finally impacts the examination which would lead to scores fewer marks and finally influence employability.

7.0 FINDINGS

- The virtual learning capacity gives a major drawback in the learning process for the arts stream students which reduces employability with the limited learning and receiving knowledge and soft skills.
- Changing government policies such as minimum working capacity and roster system blacks the normal teaching/learning activities which is another factor for the increasing unemployment among the arts stream graduates.

- Local university administrative procedures and tendencies become another hurdle for the arts-based students and faculties that the administration gives less importance to arts-based faculties.
- There are no systems to cater to the visually challenged students in the virtual learning process and this must be extended to the assessment procedures as well to the said set of students since visually challenged students are acquired only at the arts-based faculties in the state-owned universities in Sri Lanka.
- Quarantine and isolation of both the teachers and the students bring limited teaching/learning activities which too is another factor for employability.
- Lethargy of the teachers and students to follow certain types of changes which to be adopted timely-based since they do not want to try novelty in teaching and learning.

8.0 CONCLUSION

The universities now moved far away from their original ideology of “imparting and dissemination of knowledge” and now they are on “making graduates for the job market.” This drastic shift of ideology makes it more complicated during the COVID – 19 pandemic outbreaks.

The COVID – 19 pandemic created many impacts on the lives of the people, not only in Sri Lanka but throughout the globe. This has a direct impact on the Arts based graduates’ employability, especially in Sri Lanka. The delay in graduation, getting lack of knowledge in the subjects, and stress are the main drawbacks due to the pandemic situation, especially the closure of the universities for students and government policies which are unsteady.

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