



VIRTUAL INTERVENTION ON CAREER READINESS OF UNDERGRADUATES DURING THE PANDEMIC LOCKDOWN: SIGNIFICANCE, CONSTRAINTS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE

C.D. Jayasinghe^{1}, D.D.D.H. Alwis², L.A. Wijenayaka², D.T. Abeysinghe²,
D.D.G.L. Dahanayaka¹, U. A. Jayawardena¹*

¹*Department of Zoology, The Open University of Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka*

²*Department of Chemistry, The Open University of Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka*

INTRODUCTION

The current professional workforce in Sri Lanka is in a dilemma of a shortage of skilled and competent graduates. The discrepancy between undergraduate training and employee requirement is considered the major reason for graduates' unemployment and failure in the workplace. During the last two decades, higher education institutes in Sri Lanka made considerable progress in investing in the skill development of undergraduates. Moreover, career guidance units were established in every state university to prepare the graduate for career opportunities. Despite these interventions, graduates fail to achieve the attributes expected by the private sector employers and are ascribed to a lack of career readiness.

The concept of career readiness interventions has gained acceptance over the years. It is described as the individual's willingness to make a decision about their future career (Hirschi and Läge, 2007). Fresh graduates often make incorrect career decisions and have little awareness of the nature and culture of the workplace and employability skills such as leadership, critical thinking, and problem-solving. Hence, it is a prime responsibility of higher education institutes to ensure the career readiness of undergraduates during their transition from study to work. In order to fill this gap, some universities have introduced asynchronous and synchronous career interventions to their curricula.

The Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) is the only state university in Sri Lanka where students may pursue education solely through Open and Distance Learning (ODL). It serves a large student population spread throughout the country who are diverse in age, occupation employment status, marital status, etc. Though the majority of the OUSL student community consists of employed individuals, recently, there has been an increasing trend of many younger, full-time students joining the OUSL (Jayasinghe, Jayatilleke, & Liyanage 2018). Further, employed students with significant work experience also wish to change or upgrade their careers after graduation. Unfortunately, students who graduated during the recent Covid-19 pandemic have less opportunity for the development of employability skills such as teamwork, leadership, and communication skills due to the continuous closure of universities during the pandemic (Abi Hamid, Aribowo & Anggraini, 2021). According to recent studies, many different alternative approaches have been adopted to understand the career readiness among recent university graduates after the COVID-19 pandemic period. As per Abi Hamid et. al. there had been a considerable impact of the pandemic on the graduate employability of university final year students. Further, they also claim that employment prospects of university graduates in the future after COVID-19 are low in general. (Abi Hamid et al, 2021)

As society is slowly reverting to normalcy, any creative and alternative career readiness programme that provides an opportunity for students to gather information and expand their knowledge on various career pathways becomes warranted. Such programme may allow them to develop employability skills via various activities and assess their self-concept and readiness. In a recent study, the potential of enhancing graduate employability skills through online internships, as



opposed to typical practices adopted during pre-pandemic times has been reported (Gill, 2020). Alternatively, another study has reported the significance of integrating employability skills in assessment practices (Dyki, Singorahardjo & Cotronei-Baird, 2021). The study has revealed how alternative group assessment strategies support the acquisition, development and enhancement of employability skills, such as communication and teamwork, that are central to preparing students for the continually evolving future (Dyki et al, 2021).

Similarly, this study explicates the implementation of a virtual program as means of intervening with the career readiness of BSc undergraduates at the OUSL among a cohort of BSc undergraduates who were eligible for graduation in the year 2021. It was hypothesized that the content of the online sessions conducted by specialized personnel and the interactions that the students may experience during the online sessions will assist in upbringing the career readiness of the participants in the program. Eventually, the assessment of learners' perceived impact of virtual career readiness intervention on career readiness and career decision-making was assessed via a carefully designed questionnaire and recommendations for future adaptation were sought based on the findings of the survey.

METHODOLOGY

This study included a virtual career readiness workshop followed by a questionnaire-based survey, designed to investigate the learners' perceived impact of a virtual career readiness intervention on their career readiness and career decision-making. The virtual career readiness workshop was jointly organized by the ZooNet and Buckyball societies of the Department of Zoology and the Department of Chemistry, respectively, of the Faculty of Natural Sciences. This was implemented in May 2021, during the complete lockdown period due to COVID-19 pandemic. The target group was students who were eligible to graduate in 2021 from the Faculty of Natural Sciences, OUSL. The workshop comprised three sessions; **Session 1: Being Work Ready – Understanding Employer Expectations, Resume building and improving interview skills**, **Session 2: Unveil your potential: The untold stories of successful OUSL alumni**, and **Session 3- Improving leadership, teamwork, and communication skills**. Each session was about 2 hours duration.

Session 1 consisted of two guest talks by two senior managers of leading private sector companies in Sri Lanka. Guest speakers elaborated on the current trends in the labour market, employer expectations, attractive resume building, and how to face an interview effectively. This session was designed to expand the knowledge of career pathways and facilitate career decision-making. Session 2 was a panel discussion consisting of alumni of the Faculty of Natural Sciences who are currently employed in leading state and private sector organizations. Panellists shared their success stories, lessons learned from their journeys and how OUSL contributed to their career success. Session 2 was intended to build confidence and motivate students to make correct career decisions. Session 3 was conducted by OUSL staff, and participants were educated about the key employability skills such as problem-solving, leadership, and teamwork skills which allowed them to engage in problem-solving activities as groups in zoom breakout rooms. Students were asked to submit a reflective learning log on the experiences they have gained during the workshop and comment on the impact of the same on their career readiness, according to their opinion. Eventually, a certificate of completion was awarded to students who have participated in all three sessions of the workshop and submitted the reflective learning log to motivate the students in participating in the programme.

Eventually, the students' perceived impact of the intervention on their career decision was evaluated by a self-administered questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of 10 questions representing 5 Likert-type scales (0 = Strongly disagree, 1 = Disagree, 0 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree) closed-ended questions and open-ended questions allowing learners to express their views. The survey was administered as a google form and was circulated through email to all the participants. Finally, the data collected was coded and entered into an excel spreadsheet, and percentage responses were calculated.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION



The participation of students in sessions 1, 2, and 3 were 58, 53, and 56, respectively. A total of 47 students submitted the reflective learning log and responded to the questionnaire. Most of the respondents (87%) were unemployed; among them, 89% were females, while only 11% were males. Most of the respondents were between 25-29 years of age (84%) and 7% of the respondents were in the age group 30-34 and 9 % were in the age group less than 24.

Analysis of the survey data revealed that 46 students (97.9%) commented that the workshop was well organized, while one student (2.1%) stated the workshop was not well organized. 93.6% of students either agreed that the workshop fulfilled their expectations of career readiness, while 4.3% of students strongly disagreed and 2.1% of students were neutral. When they were asked which session was helpful for them to develop their employability skills, 48.9%, 42.6%, and 27.7% of students stated session 1, session 2, and session 3, respectively, were instrumental in developing their skills. The majority of students (95.8%) claimed that the workshop helped them to understand employer expectations, while 4.2% of students strongly disagreed. 97.8% of respondents reported that they could understand career options from the workshop and 2.2% stated that they could not understand the career options from the workshop. 97.9% of students reported that the success stories of OUSL alumni inspired them, while 2.1% disagreed. 97.8% of students believed that the workshop has helped them to improve their communication, teamwork, and leadership skills, and 2.2% did not agree with the statement. Out of the respondents, 93.6 % indicated that they would recommend this workshop to their fellow students. These findings are summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Overall experience and impact of the virtual career readiness programme

Statements	% response for closed-ended questions			Comments and suggestions from open-ended questions
	Agree% (Agree+ Strongly Agree%)	Neutral	Disagree% (Disagree + Strongly disagree%)	
The workshop was well organized	97.9%	0	2.1%	<p><i>“Great opportunity for us. So it would be great if all other societies too can get together and organize this so that many students get the opportunity to participate”</i></p> <p><i>“I think workshops held on OUSL face to face are mostly better. So internet connection is poor village areas. But this situation virtual platform is most good”</i></p>
The workshop fulfilled my expectations of career readiness	93.6%	2.1%	4.3%	<p><i>“I could get valuable information”</i></p> <p><i>“All 3 days gave such a big impact to attend the interview I had , and I have successfully attended them”</i></p>
The workshop helped to understand employer expectations	95.8%)	0	4.2% (4.2%)	<p><i>“The workshop to understand the expectations of employers”</i></p> <p><i>“It's better to extend the time of the workshop with more explanations of the presenters”</i></p>
The workshop helped to understand the career options	97.8 %	0	2.2%	<p><i>“Connect all willing participants to the companies that these resource personnel represent and get them employment opportunities within those companies”</i></p> <p><i>“I would like the other departments also join with this workshop because we can know what are the job opportunities of other fields.(department of computer</i></p>



				science)”
inspired by the success stories of OUSL alumni	97.9%	0	2.1%	“We love to listen to more success stories from the OUSL alumni” “Give more chances to students to speak”
helped them to improve their communication, teamwork, and leadership skills	97.8	0	2.2%	“Helped participants learn how to improve their employability skills, job market opportunities & their soft skills” “The WS is helpful to us to enhance our skills”
Recommend this workshop to a fellow student	93.6%	0	6.4%	“Highly recommend the workshop to every graduate in OUSL. The workshop was organized very well & excellent” “Please continue this workshop for all the junior batches and all the students in OUSL, because with this like opportunity is very helpful for those who is in demotivated to take as a turning point in his/ her life”

Overall, participants were satisfied with the career readiness intervention and they believed that the expected outcomes of the workshop were achieved by them such as comprehending the employer’s expectations and developing employability skills relevant to the new normal work environment. However, the study has several limitations, such as weaknesses in the survey instrument. This survey was conducted to obtain feedback from the workshop; hence a detailed survey was not included. The information about this workshop was sent to 320 students. However, only around 60 students participated in all three days. Only 47 students (15%) participated in all three sessions and completed the workshop. The low level of participation could be attributed to the unstable internet connection, lack of interest in career readiness, and lack of awareness of career readiness.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, participants were satisfied with the career readiness intervention, and they believed that they were able to achieve the expected objectives of the workshop. The outcome of this study may have implications for initiating future career readiness interventions to facilitate the effective transition of the BSc students at the OUSL from university to the professional arena. Further, a longitudinal study is required to determine the impact of this workshop on participants’ employability and career success.

REFERENCES

- Abi Hamid, M., Aribowo, D., & Anggraini, R. (2021). Design and Development of Alumni Career Information System using PHP MySQL. *Elinvo (Electronics, Informatics, and Vocational Education)*, 6(1).
- Dyki, M., Singorahardjo, M. and Cotronei-Baird, V.S. (2021), Preparing graduates with the employability skills for the unknown future: reflection on assessment practice during COVID-19, *Accounting Research Journal*, Vol. 34 No. 2, pp. 229-245.
- Gill, R. J. (2020). Graduate employability skills through online internships and projects during the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Australian example. *Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability*, 11(1), 146–158.
- Hirschi, A., & Läge, D. (2007). The relation of secondary students' career-choice readiness to a six-phase model of career decision making. *Journal of Career Development*, 34(2), 164-191.
- Jayasinghe, C.D., Jayatilleke, B.G., & Liyanage, C. (2018). Learner perceptions and engagement of pre-recorded video lectures in an online learning environment, 32nd annual conference of the Asian



Association of Open Universities, (pp-73), Vietnam (Hanoi).

Kamaruddin, M.I.H., Ahmad, A., Husain, M.A. and Abd Hamid, S.N. (2021), Graduate employability post-COVID-19: the case of a Malaysian public University. *Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning*,11(3),710-724.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Dean of the Faculty of Natural Sciences and Heads of the Department of Zoology and Chemistry are acknowledged for granting permission and the valuable support given during the implementation.