

Present Status of Graduate Employment: Evidence from Agribusiness Management Graduates of the Faculty of Agriculture, University of Ruhuna, Sri Lanka.

W. A. L. P. Madhushika, A. W. D. N. K. Athapaththu², T. B. Mallikarachchi¹, G. C. Samaraweera*¹

*Department of Agricultural Economics & Agribusiness¹, Computer Unit²,
Faculty of Agriculture, University of Ruhuna, Mapalana, Kamburupitiya, Sri Lanka*

**Corresponding author: gangani@agecon.ruh.ac.lk*

Abstract

Higher education primarily concerns producing graduates with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required for the growth of their careers while maintaining the quality of the education system. Meaningful engagement in any form of employment is crucial for graduates' overall career development. Being the only faculty that offers BSc in agribusiness management (ABM) degree in Sri Lanka, the Faculty of Agriculture, University of Ruhuna (FAUR) produces about 40 ABM graduates annually. However, the present status of their employment and their views are underexplored. Therefore, this study aims to find out the present status of employability and the suggestions of ABM graduates. Data were collected through an online questionnaire sent to all (n=192) ABM graduates in five batches. Only 97 of the graduates responded to the questionnaire. The data were analyzed descriptively and using Fisher's exact test. The employability level of ABM graduates is considerably high (82%), while a small percentage of graduates (4%) was entrepreneurs. A majority (75%) was satisfied with their jobs, and 54% recommended their jobs to peers. The main reasons for not getting jobs for graduates who were unemployed are lack of industrial experience, unsuitability of the degree, and lack of required professional qualifications. Graduated batch showed a significant association with employment status ($p < 0.05$), whereas gender and English proficiency had significant relationships with the employability in some sectors ($p < 0.05$). Graduates suggested to increase the industrial training up to 6 months or 1 year, offer practical-oriented courses to encourage graduates to become entrepreneurs, incorporate new subject areas in business management, and conduct of job fairs to bridge the gap between ABM graduates and the job-market needs. These findings recommends to developing strategies to enhance the ABM curriculum, more industry collaboration, and assurance of the quality of ABM degree.

Keywords: *Agribusiness Management, Employment, Graduates, Higher Education*

Introduction

Universities have expectation of preparing undergraduates for an evolving environment that requires workers with a variety of talents and skills (Chan, 2016). The major aim of the university education is to equip students with the knowledge, skills, and values/attitudes necessary for their career development which mainly targets the quality assurance of any higher education system. Graduate employment rate is often used as an indicator for assessing the quality of university education (Chen et al., 2021). According to Hommadi (1990), universities have a responsibility to ensure that its graduates are duly employed. It has become one of the most discussed topics today in higher education sector, due to the competition in the job market as well as diverse perceptions of graduates. Indeed, it is important to discuss about the status of graduate employment in Sri Lankan context in particular, as there is a higher demand for university education in Sri Lanka and a larger number of students are graduating every year at an increasing rate. Robinson (2000) describes that in the context of graduate employment, graduates need employability skills—the set of skills required for one to receive a job and the ability to continue in that job's duties. That reflects the relationship between employability and employment status. Moreover, Brown et al. (2003) interprets employability as the "comparable possibilities of obtaining and keeping various types of employment." Yorke (2006) explains that engaging in an employment reflects the employability of graduates as they fulfilled the requirement of capturing an employment.

The University of Ruhuna plays a crucial role as the major government academic institute in the Southern province of Sri Lanka, imparting knowledge and education to numerous students and producing graduates. Among its distinguished faculties, the Faculty of Agriculture offers three degree programs; namely, BSc in Agricultural Resource Management & Technology, BSc in ABM, and BSc in Green Technology. Notably, the BSc in ABM is offered only such undergraduate programme offered by a Sri Lankan University. Since its inception in 2012, this program has successfully completed the programme for five batches.

Having an emerging market, Sri Lanka's agribusiness sector is expanding at an increasing rate at present and thus ABM graduates have a vital role to play in this regard. Being a pioneering and only faculty that offers agribusiness management degree in Sri Lankan context, faculty of agriculture produces more than forty ABM graduates annually from 2012 onwards to cater the agribusiness sector. However, their employability status and views on developing more employable BSc in ABM degree programme are underexplored yet. There is a significant gap exists in understanding the employment level of these graduates. The recent financial recession and economic downturns have worsened the situation, leading to an increase in job layoffs. Furthermore, the supply-demand imbalance in the job

market has contributed to the growing number of unemployed students. In Sri Lanka, many graduates face prolonged periods of unemployment after completing their education.

They often struggle to find suitable employment opportunities, resulting in a situation where they are forced to settle for irrelevant jobs with low salaries (Ariyawansa, 2008). Lack of research explorations in the area in Sri Lankan context in particular open a vacuum in the existing literature. To bridge the knowledge gap, it is imperative to conduct a comprehensive study that encompasses various aspects of graduate employment.

Therefore, it is important to identify the employment status of agribusiness ABM graduates, their satisfaction on their jobs and salaries as well as their suggestions, in order to produce more-employable graduates who better meet the needs of the labor market. It enables university to assure how far its degree able to produce graduates who fit to the job market that ultimately reflects the quality of the degree provided for them as stated by previous scholars (Chen et al., 2021). Seeking their employment status and their views in this regard would support in this endeavor. Therefore, this study attempts to determine the present employment status of agribusiness management (ABM) graduate, explore the factors influencing the employment status, and provide relevant and appropriate suggestions and policy implications to produce marketable ABM graduates

Methodology

Comprehensive data collection process was carried out, targeting students who have successfully completed their degree in BSc. Agribusiness Management. A questionnaire was sent to the total populations of ABM graduates (N = 192). Only 97 of the graduates responded to the questionnaire, representing 50% of the response rate. The sample consists of individuals from five distinct batches 39, 38, 37, 36, and 35 corresponding to the academic years 2016, 2015, 2014, 2013, and 2012, respectively, who graduated from the FAUR. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics using SPSS software, and the relationship between factors affected on employment status and employed sector were analyzed using Fisher's exact test.

Results and Discussion

Results were categorized as profile of the respondents (Table 1), factors affecting on employment (Table 2), present employment status in particular and discussed the present results with the support of previous literature.

Profile of the Respondents

The majority of the respondents are from the 2012 academic year (30%). More than half of respondents (63.5%) are female. The age of the respondents varied from 27 to 35 years. Among the graduates, the majority of them had second-class uppers (37%). English proficiency was rated “good” by 53% of the respondents. A majority was Sinhalese (92%), and 50% resided in urban areas (Table 01).

Present Employment Status of ABM Graduates

A majority (82%) ABS graduate was engaged in jobs, while 18% were not. Among those who were employed, many (53%) worked at executive levels, such as environmental specialists, directors, marketing executives, farm managers, development officers etc., followed by other positions such as teachers or lecturers, or on a temporary basis as temporary demonstrators and lecturers in the university. Some graduates (03%) engaged in jobs such as pharmacy technicians, which are not related to the field of ABM. Most importantly, very few graduates (04%) entered ABM fields as entrepreneurs such as farming and polytunnel business.

Table 01: Profile of the Respondents

Factor	Category	Percentage (%)
Academic year (Batch)	2012(35)	30
	2013(36)	13
	2014(37)	19
	2015(38)	19
	2016(39)	19
Gender	Male	37
	Female	63
Class of the degree	First class	12
	Second-class uppers	37
	Second-class lowers,	30
	General	21
Ethnicity	Sinhala	92
	Tamil	6
	Muslim	2
Dwelling setting	Urban	50
	Rural	42
	Estate	8

Half of the ABM graduates engaged in the government sector, followed by private sector (46%) and in foreign employments (4%). The results of the present study are compatible with the previous study done by Sin and Neave (2016) who stated that the expansion of higher education on a significant scale

has led to a diversification that reduces the likelihood of graduates obtaining positions in the public sector.

Majority of graduates (74%) stated that they got their jobs due to their degrees, while only 16% stated that the class was considered. The main driver for pursuing a university degree, according to students, is enhanced potential for employment. (NUS, 2011). In addition to the degree, graduates stated that they were able to get their jobs due to their soft skills, English proficiency, computer literacy, professional skills, soft skills, extracurricular activities, and previous experience, networking and professional connections and extracurricular activities.

Similar findings have been reported by Arrieta and Avolio (2020). Majority (31%) of employed graduates found their jobs through online advertisements followed by competitive exams (20%) whereas only 05% got their jobs through the successful completing of their internships. Majority of the employed graduates had 2-3 years of experience in their jobs.

Majority of graduates (75%) satisfied with their jobs. However, 15% dissatisfied and 10% were neutral. Only 50% were satisfied with their salaries while another 35% was unsatisfied. However, 15% were neutral in this regard. Interestingly majority (54%) recommended their jobs to their peers; 20% did not recommend while remaining 26% were held a neutral view.

Based on the responses of the graduates who were not employed yet, stated they could not find suitable job yet (47%), or are doing higher studies (29%) or planning to go abroad (18%). The main reasons for not getting their required job as they stated were lack of industrial experience, unsuitability of the degree, lack of other professional qualifications, Lack of job-related skills and lack of personal contacts. Atkinson & Pennington (2012) also reported similar reasons for unemployment among engineering graduates in United Kingdom.

Factors Influencing the Employment Status

Factors influencing graduates' employability as well as their employment sector are important in increasing their employability. There is a significant difference between graduated batch and employment states. ($p < 0.05$). As expected, freshly passed-out batches have the highest level of unemployment compared to older batch graduates. Among the graduates from 2012 batch there is no unemployed graduates whereas among the 2016 batch of graduates (39th batch), 50% were unemployed. This implies that, with time, when getting experience and developing connections, employment can be secured. According to research done in the UK, older graduates are more capable of persuading employers that they are the best prospects in a competitive market for graduates (Purcell

et al., 1999). However, there is no significant difference between gender, class of the degree, dwelling setting, English proficiency, or ethnicity with the employment status. ($p > 0.05$). This finding reveals that ABM graduate's employment does not have any significant differences with the factors found in the literature (Table 02).

Further, factors influencing graduates' selection in the private, public, and foreign sectors were identified. Interestingly, significant associations were found between English proficiency ($p = 0.03$) and gender ($p = 0.007$) with selected sectors, while the class of the degree ($p = 0.06$) is marginally significant. The graduates who stated "very good" in English were employed in the private (52.6%), public (31.6%), and foreign (15.8%) sectors. However, the majority of graduates (69%) who stated "average" in English proficiency are employed in the public sector. Similar study by Ting et al. (2017) in Malaysia found that private sector employers seek graduates with higher English proficiency levels for positions.

Based on gender, the majority of females (61.2%) engaged in public sector jobs, while the majority of males (66.7%) engaged in private sector jobs. Blank (1985) revealed a similar situation in public sector jobs in United States. When considering the class of the degree, the majority of first-class (55.6%) and second-class upper division (59.4%) graduates are employed in public sector organizations, whereas the majority of general (53.3%) and second-class lower division (58.3%) graduates are employed in the private sector.

Table 02: Results of Fisher's Exact Test

Factor	Fisher's Exact test value	Sig. value
Batch	20.989	0.000
Gender	1.232	0.588
Class of the degree	2.562	0.474
English proficiency	3.893	0.31
Ethnicity	1.568	0.519
Dwelling setting	4.262	0.101

Relevant and Appropriate Suggestions and Policy Implications to Produce Marketable ABM Graduates

According to the suggestion given by the respondents, present study have identified some key suggestions and recommendations to improve the degree curriculum for enhancing the opportunities in job market. Majority of the graduated stated that increasing the industrial training period at least up to 6 months or 1 years is important to getting industrial experience and to improve the quality of the degree. The respondents suggested that it would be useful to update the curriculum by incorporating the most recent theoretical concepts and applications in order to provide students with the most relevant and up-to-date knowledge and skills which is requested by the industry. A more practical-

oriented curriculum while understanding the present trend in the job market, providing business exposure, and having a strong link with industry were also given as crucial points. Further they have indicated the importance of aligning the curriculum with current industry trends, technological advancements, and evolving business practices, both locally and internationally. Additionally, incorporating more practical-oriented assignments and evaluation methods that stimulate graduates' problem-solving, critical thinking, and analytical skills were identified as vital approaches.

Further, respondents have suggested to include subjects like Quality Management, Logistic Management, Accounting and Finance, Brand Management, Digital Marketing, Import and Export procedures, Stock Market to capture national and international job market. Moreover, respondents suggested to conduct workshops and knowledge sharing programs/ Annual Job fair partnered with industry experts to enhance the employment opportunities. Most importantly, they suggested increasing the business management subject areas and providing individual business launch opportunities with hands-on experience in entrepreneurship in order to motivate students to become entrepreneurs from the first year using the learning outcomes.

Conclusions

Results of this study provide valuable insights into the profile of ABM graduates. Information about the employment status, factors influencing their employment, and their suggestions for curriculum enhancement to make the ABM degree marketable in future are important for University/Faculty level strategic planning. It showcased that a significant proportion of graduates were engaged in various job roles across different sectors, with a majority in executive-level positions. Despite the challenges, a small percentage of graduates ventured into entrepreneurship within the ABM field. Although there are no factors affecting employment status except the graduated batch, English proficiency and gender have a significant relationship with the employment sector. These insights suggest the need for targeted support to improve English proficiency and address gender-related disparities to foster diverse employment opportunities. The graduates' suggestions for curriculum enhancement were multifaceted, centering on practical exposure, industry relevance, and entrepreneurial development. The emphasis on extending industrial exposure and updating curriculum content reflects the demand for real-world applicability and alignment with evolving industry trends. As higher education institutions strive to enhance employability and empower students, these insights provide a foundation for strategic improvements in curriculum design, industry collaboration, and overall educational quality.

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