RP3

Perception of Employers on Quality Assurance in University Education in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

The worldwide growing attention on quality assurance in higher education induces universities to restructure their institutional objectives and programs to cater to the demands of the stakeholders. Employers are keen on the quality of higher education to recruit good quality graduates. However, it seems that the incompatibility in the employers' expectations and the quality of graduates, the graduate unemployment has become a severe problem in Sri Lanka during the last few decades. Therefore, the objective of the present study is to identify the employers' expectations on knowledge, attitudes, and skills of graduates while examining the employers' perception in developing a quality assurance system in higher education in Sri Lanka. A Google form-based questionnaire was prepared to collect primary data. The pre-tested questionnaire was sent to the employers who are recruiting (n=30) as well as not recruiting (n=30) graduates from the Faculty of Agriculture, University of Ruhuna, using the snowball sampling technique. Descriptive statistical tools and the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank test occupied as the main statistical tools for the data analysis. Concerning the performance and skills of hired graduates, 52% of the employers were satisfied with the job related knowledge that graduates possess. Moreover, 30% were strongly satisfied with the skills of the graduates employed in their respective companies while 26% were satisfied with the skills of the graduates. However, regarding performance level, only 33% of employers were satisfied with the existing performance level while 40% were satisfied with the accuracy/precision of the work. Wilcoxon Sign Rank Test results revealed that employers are dissatisfied regarding the current quality assurance system giving insights of improving an effective improved quality assurance system (Test value=1.795; P =0.0173). Based on the responses of the companies not employing graduates attached to the faculty, lack of practical experience (27%), lack of interview facing skills (17%) and better performance of graduates from other universities (13%) were the main reasons highlighted by the respondents. Among all respondents (n=30), the majority (60%) mentioned the quality of higher education as developing innovative and independent thinkers, having a knowledgeable and up to date staff, good links to industry, good university facilities, library, career guidance, and maintaining quality teaching materials and methods of teaching. The

findings of this study will be of great significance for policymakers in higher education to uplift the quality of the Sri Lankan higher education system to produce quality graduates.

Keywords: Employers' Perception, Quality Assurance, University Education, Satisfaction

Introduction

Quality Assurance in higher education refers to an ongoing and continuous process of evaluating the existing status of the higher education system, quality of education institutes, and education programs (Vlăsceanu et al., 2007). The worldwide growing attention to quality assurance in higher education induces universities to restructure their institutional objectives and programs to cater their stakeholders' demands. Universities have understood that their long-term survival within the sector is mainly dependent upon the quality of the services they provide (Tsinidou et al., 2010). Institutional practices and monitoring of policies and methods to improve the quality of their education provision can be identified as internal quality assurance while external quality assurance refers to the institutional policies and practices whereby the quality of higher education institutions and programs are assured (Shamsudin et al., 2009).

The four main stakeholder groups in the higher education system are providers (educational institutes), users (students), users of outputs (employers), and employees (Schidler et al, 2015). Employers are keen on quality in higher education to hire good quality graduates. Their expectations regarding quality graduates lie in the comprehensive skills and knowledge which graduates possess to develop competencies to match with industry demands.

The failure of higher education institutes to build high-quality graduates negatively affects the graduate's employability and the relationship between employers and higher education institutes (Dicker et al, 2019). However, incompetent university graduates have become a common complaint in the labour industry. The situation in Sri Lanka is also similar to the world context. In Sri Lanka, during the last two decades, increasing concern has been expressed about the quality of university education. Therefore, developing high-quality graduates is of utmost importance to mitigate the unemployed graduate issue. For that purpose, it is necessary to identify and understand the perception of students and employers on quality assurance in higher education. However, within the Sri Lankan context, existing literature only provides the students' perception of quality assurance in higher education. Therefore, the present study aims to develop an effective quality assurance system in higher education to minimize the gap between the employers' expectations and experience regarding the performance of graduates. Thereby, the research findings will contribute to existing literature of quality assurance in higher education by providing employers perceptions and it will induce an effective implementation

and development of quality assurance system within the Sri Lankan higher education system. Therefore, the objective of the present study is to identify the employers' expectation on knowledge, attitudes and skills of the graduates while examining the perception of employers in developing quality assurance systems in higher education in Sri Lanka.

Methodology

The present study was designed to conduct as a pre-tested questionnaire survey. Employers who engaged in occupations in the Agricultural sector were considered as the targeted population. A Google form-based questionnaire was prepared to collect primary data in English medium and it was sent to the employers who are hiring as well as not hiring graduates from Faculty of Agriculture, University of Ruhuna, using snowball sampling technique. The initial questionnaire was prepared with the assistance of previous literature and pre-testing was done with 5 respondents and their feedback was considered in designing the final questionnaire. The reliability of the questionnaire was measured using Cronbach's alpha (Taber, 2018) and it has given 0.7 Cronbach's alpha value for each questionnaire item.

Accordingly, the questionnaire was designed to assess the perception of employers towards the development of quality assurance framework to enhance the employability of Agricultural graduates. A five-point Likert scale was used to identify their views on the existing quality assurance framework available in the university system in Sri Lanka. The link was disabled after 7 days of circulation (from 1st of July 2021-7th July 2021) and 30 responses were obtained. IBM SPSS version 25 software was mainly utilized for analytical purposes. Primary data were analyzed by using descriptive and inferential statistical methods such as the Wilcoxon Signed Rank test. The Wilcoxon Signed Rank test was selected to measure the significance of statements provided by the respondents.

Results and Discussion

Demographic Profile

There were 65% male and 35% female respondents. Thirty five percent respondents belonged to the 45-55 age category. Sixty two percent have stated degree level as their highest educational level while 35% have studied up to postgraduate level. The majority, 57% of the participants, represented the private sector. Seventy percent of the respondents are engaged in managerial level occupations and 35% of officials are engaged in their current job for about 10-15 years.

Perception of Employers on Hiring Graduates and Graduate Performance Level in Achieving Company Targets

The majority of (69%) the employers stated that they hire graduates from the Faculty of Agriculture, University of Ruhuna. Regarding the graduates' performance and skills, 52% of employers were satisfied with the knowledge graduates possess while 30% of employers were satisfied strongly with the skills of graduates they hired. Regarding performance level, 33% were satisfied with the current performance level. Respondents (40%) were satisfied with the accuracy/precision of the work shown by hired graduates from the Faculty of Agriculture, University of Ruhuna. Table 1 depicts the Wilcoxon Sign Rank Test results regarding the employers' satisfaction on existing and potential quality assurance systems in higher education in Sri Lanka. Interestingly, employers have shown dissatisfaction regarding the existing system giving insights of improving an effective improved quality assurance system. Furthermore, they were dissatisfied with the performance of graduates in achieving company targets particularly. However, all the other statements were proven valid as well as significant about developing a quality assurance system in higher education within the country.

Table 1:Overall satisfaction of employers regarding the quality assurance system in Sri Lanka

No	Statement	Mean	Test Value	P Value
1.	Overall satisfaction regarding the quality assurance system in Sri Lanka	0	1.795	0.073
2.	Overall satisfaction regarding the performance of graduates in achieving company targets	1	4.146	0.000
3.	Developing a quality assurance system in higher education is essential to produce outstanding and marketable graduates in Sri Lanka	1	3.910	0.000
4.	Developing an effective quality assurance system enhances the performance levels of graduates in every aspect	1.5	3.996	0.000
5.	Quality assurance system is a timely decision to minimize the gap between company's expected performance and actual performance of graduates	1	3.969	0.000
6.	Quality assurance system in higher education produces globally competitive, marketable employees	2	3.911	0.000
7.	Developing a quality assurance system promotes production of industry-oriented graduates.	1	4.096	0.000

Perception of Agricultural Industries on Developing a Quality Assurance Mechanism in University Education

The majority of respondents perceive the quality of higher education mainly as developing innovative and independent thinkers, knowledgeable and up-to-date staff, good links to industry, good university facilities, library, career guidance, and quality teaching materials and methods of teaching used. These findings embellish the findings of Gunawardena (2017), where he aroused the requirement of educational institutions with the ability to discover new knowledge, to develop innovative applications of these discoveries, and to transfer them into the marketplace through entrepreneurial activities. Furthermore, he highlighted the need of focusing more on research and publications rather than becoming only teaching universities.

According to the past literature, training/experience is a highly demanded factor in the job market especially, in the private sector. Further, there is a high demand for additional competencies such as IT skills, leadership qualities, analytical ability, teamwork and interpersonal relations along with a degree (Ariyawansa, 2008). The present study identified the reasons for not hiring graduates including lack of practical experience, lack of interview-facing skills and better performance of graduates from other universities.

Conclusions

The findings of this study conclude that the employers in the Agricultural sector are not satisfied with the existing quality assurance system in higher education. Furthermore, they show the requirement of improving job knowledge, performance level, and accuracy and precision when performing in the job. Lack of practical experience, lack of interview facing skills, and better performance of graduates from other universities were highlighted as the main reasons for not recruiting graduates. The findings of this study will be of great significance for policymakers in higher education to uplift the quality of the Sri Lankan higher education system to produce quality graduates. The present study addressed the employers' perception regarding graduates of the Faculty of Agriculture, the University of Ruhuna only. Therefore, it will be beneficial to consider employers' perceptions regarding graduates in Sri Lanka as a whole to develop a feasible quality assurance system in higher education.

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