

## Can Service Learning enhance Graduate Capital? Evidence from Sri Lankan State Universities

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### Abstract

Employability of graduates has been a topic of high interest among graduates, academics, employers and economists alike for decades. Researchers argue that the responsibility of preparing graduates for their first job roles, has not been adequately owned by the universities nor the employers. The graduates themselves, give less attention to the issue and usually ill prepared for their first job roles. Service Learning (SL) is a futuristic andragogical strategy that changes the receiver and the giver of the service. In this study, the researcher examines how SL can be adopted as an enhancer of employability potential for graduates. Since the SL is new to the academic world in general and also to the Sri Lankan education system, this inductive study adopted the Grounded Case Study method using theoretical sampling to study the influence of SL as a strategy for enhancing graduate employability potential – Graduate Capital (GC) in state universities of Sri Lanka. The findings of the study include the features of SL practiced in Sri Lanka, GC attributes and the extent of enhancements of GC attributes due to partaking in SL program. The current study concludes that SL provides overall improvement to GC attributes.

**Keywords:** *Employability, Graduate Capital, Grounded Case Study, Service Learning*

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## Introduction

Researchers argue that responsibility of developing employable graduate gravitates around with the educators (Harvey, 2001), or employers (Fejes, 2010) or the graduates (Garsten & Jacobson, 2004). Graduates struggle to transition into their first jobs despite of the main function of education being meeting the needs of the labour market (Bathmaker, Ingram, & Waller, 2013). Addressing this issue seems to reside outside the main focus of university education in Sri Lanka as Sri Lankan tertiary education system is focused more on imparting academic knowledge to the students rather than focusing on employability (Ariyawansa, 2008). Whilst the educators seem to have been making conscious efforts to take the university education system out of the traditional frame (Bringle & Hatcher, 1999), the andragogical aspects that are closer to the adult students' learning needs were found in SL.

Sri Lanka has a highly competitive entrance exam for the state universities and the best performing students at this examination only around 20% of the qualified students (University Grants Commission, 2018) enter into these universities. Whilst it can be argued that the percentage of students selected for education at state universities are too few, such a group of student0073 forms a solid base for developing competent contributors in key roles of organizations they eventually find the employment in. This also supports the contribution of the respective organizations for the national economy.

Sri Lanka has had a rich Buddhist temple-based education system prior to colonization. British colonial rulers established university education in Sri Lanka in 1921. The primary objective of establishing the university education in Sri Lanka was to bridge the gap between the people and British administrators by creating an elite class of officers (Jayasundara, 2014). Even though

the Sri Lankan university education system has taken many positive strides since then, including government sponsored university education since 1945 and thus recording a significantly high participation rate among other developing nations (Wickramasinghe, 2018), the relatively high rate of unemployment among graduates has been a concern for decades. The university education system is also accused of being unable to modify the traditional content of education to the needs of the job market (Ariyawansa, 2008). Since the liberalization of the economy in Sri Lanka towards an open economy in 1978, the private sector has been the driving force of the economy. Therefore, the universities are expected to understand and develop the employability attributes of the students that support them in getting employed in the private sector.

Examining the applicability of SL in Sri Lankan tertiary education system is important due to two reasons. Firstly, Sri Lanka has committed that by 2030 it will achieve the Sustainability Development Goal (SDG 4.4) that stands for substantially achieving the relevant skills for decent jobs. Awareness on demand side factors for employability like relevant competencies and attributes should be explored. Study on GC serves this purpose. On the other hand, despite many involvements by the university students in serving community needs, such activities do not target skill development in a structured manner. Service Learning that is new to the Sri Lankan university education system addresses student development in ways cognitive, behavioral, emotional a social outcome (Simonet, 2008). As it would be useful to understand SL's influence on the students' competency building, outcome of this study would be significant for educators, and the policymakers of education.

Kolb's Intuitive Learning Theory (1984) which many SL researches are anchored on is challenged by other researchers like Fenwick (2003) as Kolb's Intuitive Learning Theory (ILT) doesn't adequately provide contextual



and social aspects of experiential learning. On the other hand, Mezirow's conceptual framework (Mezirow, 1990) is regarded as a young theory by other researchers like Cranton (2013). Therefore, further testing of Kolb's ILT is required. Empirically, concerns on content validity and reliability of SL studies have been raised (Celio, Dulrak & Dymnicki, 2011). Studies on SL are resource hungry and therefore, usually limited to smaller sample sizes therefore, certain regression analysis cannot be carried out. Moreover, quality issues such as students not understanding how the feedback tools are used have been found (Joseph, Stone, Grantham, Harmancioglu, & Ibrahim, 2007).

In this study, the researcher explores key attributes that employers look for in hiring university graduates. These attributes would be the GC attributes for selected Sri Lankan employers. Thereafter, the researcher goes on to examine whether SL helps to develop the GC attributes.

The main purpose of this study is to examine how SL can be adopted as an enhancer of employability potential of graduates and to build a theoretical framework related to same. The outcomes of this study are expected to contribute to developing a GC model that helps the recruiters and the talent developers alike in graduate selection and development. Secondly, the universities would be able to use the same GC model to provide career guidance for the students. The outcome of the current study can also be used to upgrade university course curricula to support the employability of graduates.

## Literature Review

### What makes graduates employable?

Despite earning a good degree, many of the fresh graduates struggle to find the job they desire (Begal & Simon, 2008; Mourshed, Patel & Suder, 2014). Researchers argue that the academic qualifications alone don't help

the students' employability (Brown, Hesketh, & Williams, 2003; Finch, Hamilton, & Zehner, 2013; Tomlinson, 2017). They argue that soft skills or employability skills must adequately complement academic qualifications for improving employability potential. More recent studies by Tomlinson (2017) suggests that the employability skills go even beyond soft skills to be acquired through lived experience that is more dynamic and interactive.

The definition of employability has been varying among theorists due to its complex nature. While Hillage and Pollard (1998) defined it as someone's ability to find her first job McQuaid, Green and Danson, (2005) defined it as the ability of unemployed persons to find a job while an employed person finds a better job. Paadi (2014) explains that employability influences three theories: Talcott Parson's Consensus Theory that is linked to norms and shared beliefs of the society; Conflict theory of Karl Marx, who elaborated how the finite resources of the world drive towards eternal conflict; and Human Capital Theory of Becker which is more "General purpose and firm-specific" (Gibbon & Waldman, 2004, p. 206) where any stock of skills, knowledge or competencies are believed to be contributing towards the productivity of an individual.

According to the review by Sumanasiri, Yajid and Khathibi (2015), studies on employability have evolved from "Skills" approach of Cotton (1993) to "Skills Plus" approach of Knight and Yorke (2002). Skills approach discusses basic, higher order and affective skills and Skills Plus approach emphasizes that the skills are complemented by understanding of subject, meta-cognition and personal qualities. Later, Pool and Sewell (2007) introduced the "CareerEDGE" model where career development, work-life experience, subject understanding and skills, generic skills and emotional intelligence are comprised of the core of the model. Also, self-efficacy, self-confidence and self-esteem were other elements of this model that was



supported by reflection and evaluation. More recently, career management skills have been in frequent discussion among researchers (Bridgstock, 2009; Jackson & Wilton, 2016; Tomlinson, 2017). Tomlinson (2017) developed the Capital approach departing from other approaches where “skills” were at the core.

### **What is Graduate Capital?**

According to Tomlinson (2017), GC is the potential of a graduate to become employable. GC covers five capital domains: Human Capital, Social Capital, Cultural Capital, Psychological Capital and Identity capital. Human Capital is the technical skills, experience and employability skills possessed by someone (Astin & Sax, 1998; Cotton 1993; Easterling & Rudell, 1997). Social Capital covers areas such as networking, team working and collaboration with others (Astin & Sax, 1998; Clarke 2017; Coleman 1988). Cultural Capital covers cultural knowledge, cultural fit, and alignment with values (Cook, Faulconbridge, & Muzio 2012; Kalfa & Taksa 2015). Psychological Capital covers qualities such as resilience, adaptability and self-efficacy (Easterling & Rudell 1997; Yeh, 2010). Identity capital cover the ability of someone to present and project him/herself positively and the ability to create a personal brand (Holmes, 2013; Jackson 2016).

### **What is Service-Learning?**

Service Learning is a novel pedagogical or andragogical strategy that promotes learning by providing a service to a community. In SL, both the giver and the receiver of the service are benefited. According to Giles and Eyler (1994), SL was first coined by Robert Sigmon and William Ramsey in 1967. The theoretical roots of SL stem from the work of John Dewey that is based on the concepts of experiential learning. Kolb’s model for intuitive learning is built on the work of Dewey, Lewin and Piaget. “Taken together, Dewey’s philosophical pragmatism, Lewin’s

social psychology, and Piaget’s cognitive developmental genetic epistemology form a unique perspective on learning and development” (Kolb, Boyatzis, and Mainemelis, 2001, p.2). “Service-Learning is a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and experience” (Jacoby, 1996, p. 5).

There is a lacuna of studies on SL in Sri Lankan context. In other past studies of SL, some theorists argue that Kolb’s experiential learning theory doesn’t adequately consider the contextual and social aspects of experiential learning (Fenwick 2003). Also, some studies follow Mezirow’s (1990) conceptual framework of transformational learning theory that requires further testing being a young theory. Therefore, there is no clear consensus on the theoretical foundation that can be used for SL. Tomlinson’s (2017) GC conceptual framework has consisted of five distinct capitals. However, there is no clear boundary between the capitals as attributes of the capitals seem to overlap (Côté, 2005; Jeannotte, 2003).

There is a question of whether participating students of SL projects chose the projects on their own and whether the SL projects were linked to the academic curriculum (Celio et al., 2011). SL studies are largely time-consuming and often involve small sample sizes from a single institute (Bialka & Havlik, 2016; Cress et al., 2010). In some studies, the data is self-reported and not been triangulated by the others such as teachers. Also, some studies are affected by selection bias in choosing respondents.

### **Methodology**

The researcher examined the influence of SL on GC for graduates from state universities in Sri Lanka. In doing so, two key issues needed to be resolved. Firstly, election of the



methodology should consider that SL is a young andragogical approach to the world and to Sri Lanka and that GC is also a novel concept. Secondly, since there are many community-related work that are carried out by university students, a definition for SL for the researched student activities must be articulated.

Studying on the learning gained by the students following a university course and examining the enhancement of employability potential are broad and complex topics. Therefore, such studies require the exploration of contextual aspects. Service Learning is new in the university curriculum in Sri Lanka. Therefore, there is little knowledge and understanding of SL as well as GC. Contextual understanding aspects are less effectively grasped by quantitative approach (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Gummesson 2000; Hammersley 2008). Also, as the purpose of the study also is to construct a theoretical framework; therefore, a suitable method will be required. Therefore, looking at the characteristics of this research, a qualitative approach has been deemed suitable for this research.

According to Benbasat, Goldstein and Mead (1987), in situations with contemporary events and issues in natural setting, case study approach would be applicable. Also, since there aren't many studies in the area of SL and GC, the data could come through theoretical sampling in grounded theory. As Merriam (2001) and Yin (2014) suggest case studies can be combined with other research strategies. In the current research, the case study method is combined with grounded theory according to the grounded case study method as suggested by Eisenhardt (1989), who embedded case studies in Straussian Grounded Theory.

The study flows in three distinct phases where the first phase envelops the pre-understanding of the researcher and the literature reviews on SL and GC. The second phase of the research is the core research and

analysis phase that is split into three sub segments. Theoretical sampling was adopted in this phase of the study were inputs of the previous stage respondents were used to determine the respondents of the subsequent stage. In the first segment, a web content search was carried out to identify Sri Lankan state universities that are offering SL courses. As an outcome of this search four SL courses carried out by three universities were identified. The academics who conduct selected SL courses were interviewed to understand the attributes of the SL courses. However, not all the courses under the label of SL qualify as Academic SL based on the definitions articulated by Furco (1996) and Howard (2001). Based on the inputs of the academics of selected SL course, the researcher gathered the list of employers who hire the students that follow SL course of the university. In the second segment, eight identified employers were interviewed to explore on the GC attributes for respective organizations – the attributes that are assessed by the employers in selecting graduate students for employment. GC attributes in comparison with the model of Tomlinson (2017) were identified. In the third segment, students of the selected SL course/courses were interviewed to assess the extent of enhancement of predefined GC attributes as a result of them following the given SL program. The third phase of the current study is dedicated to three major outputs from the study 1) Definition of SL as practiced in a selected course, 2) Definition of GC for selected Corporates and 3) Contribution of SL for enhancing GC in the given case.

Semi-structured interview questionnaires according to the Straussian Grounded Theory (1987) was used to guide interviews with the respondents. The collected data was analyzed using open coding initially and then with support of axial and selective coding.

The current study answers three research questions a) What is the definition of Service Learning as practiced in Sri Lanka b) What is



the definition of Graduate Capital as perceived by employers in Sri Lanka c) How does Service Learning contribute to enhance Graduate Capital in the context of Sri Lanka.

## Findings and Discussion

Whilst there are several similarities between the SL programs found in literature including course based, credit based or with a structure for reflection (Celio et al., 2011), in answering the three research questions above, the current study revealed that SL program under study featuring a several unique attributes. Similarities between current study and others include the following: credit based course structure - where 8 academic credits have been allocated in the case studied; opportunities for reflective learning - where the structure of the course supporting a 5 to 6 months of course duration with many opportunities to reflect; benefits for receiver and the giver - where the SL projects are focused on delivering community needs as well as providing opportunities for the students to learn and sharpen their skills. These similarities are in accordance with the SL program features described by Bringle & Hatcher (1999). Unique features of the current study are as stated next. Firstly, objective of the SL course itself is enhancing employability of the graduates; Secondly, There is a close collaboration between corporate sponsors and the university in delivering the SL program; Thirdly, coaching and mentoring activities support delivering the program objectives; Fourthly, the selection of SL project and the project teams are voluntary by the students.

Graduate Capital model of Tomlinson (2017), is a novel conceptual model that preceded the skills approach of (Cotton, 1993), Career EDGE model of Knight and Yorke (2002), The Graduate Capital model constructed based on the feedback of employers interviewed included common capitals such as Human Capital, Social Capital, Cultural Capital, Psychological

Capital, and Identity Capital. As one of the Human Resources directors explained “I would say the five constructs (Capitals) are relevant to any level of hiring – not only graduates (E2L25-27)”. Following other attributes were identified by Sri Lankan Employers as unique compared to the findings in the literature. Firstly, Physical Health and Creativity are recognized as attribute of Human Capital. Increase of non-communicable diseases in the world has made the focus on health more relevant (Engelgau, Okamoto, Navaratne & Gopalan, 2010). Creativity, that has been argued by Chawla & Lenka (2018) as a key ingredient in surviving in ever changing world has been identified as concept that is linked to Human Capital. Walberg and Stariha (1992) has proved the link between creativity and Human Capital. Secondly, Leadership Capital was recognized by the employers as an attribute of GC. Although Political Leadership has been mostly referred to in Leadership capital, Ulrich (2015) introduced a Leadership Capital index that combines organizational leadership and individual leadership. Thirdly, all the six individual capitals of Graduate Capital of the study were found to be influencing each other. In the literature such interplay has been found (Côté, 2005; Larson & Luthans, 2006; Nepstad & Bob, 2006; Novicevic, & Harvey, 2004; Nagoma & Ntale, 2016; Wood & Wood, 1996).

Regarding enhancement of GC following taking part in SL in the context of Sri Lanka, the study revealed that SL enhances the attributes of GC. This provides opportunities or SL to be included in university curricula.

## Conclusion

The employability of university graduates is a concern of numerous stakeholders, including the educational policymakers, universities, students, and employers. There is much criticism against stakeholders for not focusing efforts on employability within tertiary education. The current study on the



influence of SL over GC defines the features of a SL program that is conducted in Sri Lanka and the GC attributes of Employers who hire the students that follow the identified SL program. Accordingly, it was found that the GC attributes are enhanced by taking part in the SL program under study. In the main study the researcher has also presented an agenda and a framework for including SL as an andragogical strategy for enhancing GC of university students.

There were several delimitations and limitations to this study. A key delimitation is limiting the study to SL courses in state universities. Also, input of employers to capture the GC was delimited to eight employers based on the feedback of four academics who are involved in SL program. As limitations, Service-Learning programs with the academic SL criteria was offered only in one state university, the batch size of the program was 21 students and time allocated for interviews of the students was 30 minutes each.

Since SL and GC are new areas of study, more studies on the topics would be required. Since the current study focuses on one case, more such cases would be required to validate the outcomes. The current study has studied the academic courses of state universities with the label of "Service Learning". Further research can be conducted on similar programs with other course names to see whether such courses possess attributes of Academic Service Learning. Whilst the current study focuses on tertiary level of education in state universities, new researches can be conducted on other levels of education and other types of institutes. The GC attributes in the current study are based on the inputs of employers who hire students who follow the identified SL course. The GC attributes can be validated with other employers in Sri Lanka too.

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