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The Conceptualisation of Employability among Higher Education Administrators in Sri Lanka's Turbulent Labour Market

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Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning

Abstract

Purpose

Employability is an established research theme in Western literature, however, in developing economies the concept remains unclear and under researched. This study addresses this lacuna by exploring how Sri Lankan higher education administrators conceptualise employability and which capitals they perceive as needing development to achieve employability.

Design/methodology/approach

The research utilised semi-structured interviews with an expert panel, responsible for leading the development of the employment agenda within Sri Lankan higher education. The purposive sample included four Sri Lankan Vice Chancellors, representing leadership at 27% of the country's publicly funded universities and the higher education funding commission. The qualitative data collected was thematically analysed to identify how employability was conceptualised and the perceived employability skills and capitals required.

Findings

The findings demonstrated that employability was conceptualised as requiring transferable skills and job specific occupational skills. This view of employability represents a narrow definition with an emphasis on skill development rather than longer term capability building. The results show the applicability of Bourdieu's (1977) capitals in the Sri Lankan higher education context, with cultural and social capital and proficiency in the English language critical to meeting employability objectives.

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Originality

This research addresses the shortage of research about the concept and requirements of employability in developing countries. Most employability studies have drawn on samples from students, lecturers, and employers, whilst this study considers the phenomenon from the perspectives of strategic administrators in higher education who guide the employability agenda in practice. These insights are important in informing policy makers to calibrate a more balanced approach by incorporating employability into the Sri Lankan higher education curriculum and sector strategy.

Key Words

Employability, Higher Education, Capitals, Education Policy, Bourdieu

Introduction

Employability has become a high priority for policy makers throughout the world (Dinh et al., 2023). Governments have increasingly tasked higher education (HE) with the responsibility for the employability of their graduates (Bell, 2023; Padgett and Donald, 2023). In Sri Lanka, higher education institutions (HEIs) are criticised for “failed” policies due to the ongoing high graduate unemployment rate. Employability schemes have been developed and implemented in Sri Lanka, which provide a stronger emphasis on jobs (World Bank, 2022; National Human Resources Policy, 2017); however, the graduate unemployment rate has steadily risen (World Bank, 2022; Gunatilaka *et al.*, 2010). Whilst 29,545 graduates are being produced in both the state and private HE sectors (UGC, 2018), the latest available 2018 graduate unemployment rate was 54% (UGC, 2018). Besides, there is widespread under employment with little research to explain the nature of this problem. The country has experienced political and economic turmoil, due to from the long-term unemployment levels (World Bank, 2022). The need to understand employability is even more critical given the latest political and economic crises.

Sri Lankan HE is predominantly governed by the state. The University Grants Commission (UGC) is the apex of the Sri Lankan state funded HE sector. The UGC's responsibilities include funding, student admissions and establishing quality control and academic standards. There are 18 state-funded universities currently operating in Sri Lanka that offer free education but with very limited places for potential students, leading to fierce competition for places (UGC, 2021). Students who are not able to secure admission often seek other means of HE, including studying overseas or enrolling with transnational and/or private education providers who entered the sector after the 1978 reforms. However, the University Grant Commission's tracer study of graduates (UGC, 2018) noted that the state sector HE graduates have lower employment prospects than their private HE counterparts. Of note, Sri Lanka has an outsize global role, despite its comparatively small population; it is the 3rd largest transnational market in the world, after China and Malaysia.

Whilst employability is high on the agenda across the world, the conceptualization and measurement of employability is often geographically rooted (Neroorkar, 2022) and employability research from the angle of academic leaders is limited as most research into employability adopts student and graduate samples (Hettige, 2000; Nimmi et al., 2022). This

has led to calls for further research to identify the views of other stakeholders, such as educational leaders, in crises and uncertain circumstances (Nguyen, 2023). This paper addresses this call and the need for further geographical contextualization of employability. It also considers educational leaders' conceptualization of employability with the aim of understanding how Sri Lankan HE administrators conceptualize employability, and which capitals they perceive as needing development to achieve employability. To achieve this aim, the research answers the following research questions:

How do Sri Lankan HE administrators conceptualize employability?

Which capitals do Sri Lankan HE administrators perceive as needing development to achieve employability?

Literature Review

The Concept of Employability

Extant literature shows the term 'employability' is understood in divergent ways by different stakeholders (Gupta and Mahajan, 2024). Perceptions of employability also change; for example, Howell et al. (2023) discovered that students' views of employability started narrow when they began a degree and broadened as they completed their studies. Narrow definitions of employability are based around the individual's generic and occupational skills (Bridgstock, 2009). It gives significance to the development of skills and dispositions to be attractive to potential employers in terms of short-term employment outcomes (Bell, 2016; Rosenberg *et al.*, 2012). Broader definitions of employability acknowledge the labour market, personal characteristics, disciplinary differences, and placing work into context within the individual's life (Römogens *et al.*, 2020; Barrie, 2004). Skills such as the 'use of tools', 'acting autonomously' and 'interacting in heterogeneous groups' are seen as underpinning individuals' reflectiveness and life-long learning (Rosenberg *et al.*, 2012). Contemporary research has also identified digital competencies, business fundamentals and behavioural skills as valuable for employability (Gupta and Mahajan, 2024).

On the surface, Sri Lankan employability schemes seem to be adopting a range of capabilities like Bourdieu's immediate and longer-term capital development. These can be identified in policy documents that emphasise a stronger focus on jobs (e.g., World Bank, 2022; National Human Resources Policy, 2017). However, Ariyawansa (2008) and Chandrakumara (2015)

show that through developing skills such as management skills (decision-making skills, resiliency, resource efficiency, planning, goal setting, and risk taking) and personal management, they could achieve the objectives of broader definitions of employability and enterprise (Mason *et al.*, 2009; Saadat *et al.*, 2022). Wise use of resources and caring skills are outward focused and have a glimpse of broader skills and promote an individual's reflectiveness and life-long learning (Barrie, 2004). Sri Lanka, therefore, has both focuses and cannot be positioned under either a narrow or broader definition.

Soft skills are non-technical skills and are perceived as essential for professional functioning (Cassidy, 2006), and transferable to the workplace (Jackson, 2013; Bell, 2016). Soft skills vary from basic skills such as oral communication, to higher order skills such as learning skills and strategies, problem solving, interpersonal skills, self-discipline and the ability to work without supervision (Small *et al.*, 2018; Jackson, 2013). The limited Sri Lankan research recognises a similar set of skills as the first part of employability skills (Chandrakumara, 2015, Ariyawansa, 2008). Chandrakumara's (2015) study makes the case that some skill areas and skill indicators are of higher relevance to the Sri Lankan labour market. Indicator skills such as concern for others, empathy, volunteering, and communication skills are used to demonstrate main skill areas such as thinking, relations, and caring which are widely available in the Western literature. As a deeply religious society Sri Lankan values are constructed upon such skills (Ariyawansa, 2008). Developing skills such as English, Tamil and Sinhala languages among graduates enables the work force to work across cultures. This also enhances peace and harmony in the society (Ariyawansa, 2008; UGC, 2018).

Sri Lankan employability literature shares similar attributes of Western employability literature. However, some inconsistencies exist among Sri Lankan researchers regarding employability skills. Seminal western researchers like Cassidy (2006) and Cotton (2001) explicitly discuss the importance of distinguishing between employability skills and occupational skills. They identify technical skills as those necessary for a specific function in a specific discipline, and non-technical skills such as those relevant across many different jobs or professions (Cassidy, 2006; Cotton, 2001). Sri Lankan literature does not distinguish the difference between employability skills (non-technical skills) and occupational skills (technical skills); it suggests that subject knowledge, industry specific knowledge and the ability to apply subject specific knowledge to a specific occupation are the second part of employability skills

(Ariyawansa, 2008; Chandrakumara, 2015). Hence, there is a lack of conceptual clarity in the Sri Lanka employability research.

Capitals and Employability

It has been posited that having the right capital can provide an advantage in securing employment (Verhaeghe et al., 2015). Bourdieu (1986) extended the concept of capital beyond the traditional economic view, to consider cultural qualities that produce power in society through individuals as they transform themselves.

Cultural Capital

Cultural capital is understood as formation of cultural knowledge, dispositions and behaviors of a graduate aligned with an employer (Tomlinson, 2017). It is positioned as one of the most important elements of employability (Kossek, 2000). The right kind of cultural capital allows the job seeker to understand the rules of the game in different professional groups (Smith, 2010). The ability to follow these rules signifies belonging, and the skills to 'play' by the rules, and guide a person's status.

Bourdieu (1986) discusses the importance of cultural capitals via cultural knowledge in the labour market (e.g. Tamil or English or Sinhala fluency). He identifies three forms of cultural capital: "in the embodied state i.e. in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body; in the objectified state, in the form of cultural goods; and in the institutionalised state a form of objectification which must be set apart because, as will be seen in the case of educational qualifications, it confers entirely original properties on the cultural capital which it is presumed to guarantee" (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 245).

Although the embodied state of cultural capital is developed mainly in the milieu of a graduate and outside the classroom, educational institutes can enhance it through developing access (Small *et al.*, 2018; Tomlinson, 2017). Western strategies such as widening participation for disadvantaged groups in the UK are prime examples of programmes which have been used for enhancing a graduate's cultural capital and nurture cultural exposition as well as the self-perception of value (Neff, 2005). The ability to demonstrate the embodied form of capital through good English, humour, and body language is significant when graduates enter the labour market (Kalfa and Taksa, 2015).

There is a relationship between class structure, education, and the economy in Sri Lanka. Top institutions in the hierarchy have different sets of cultural capitals than their counterparts (Hettige, 2000). Their institutional reputations are much higher; hence, graduates from these organisations hold a cultural capital currency, which provides them with elite status in the labour market, such as the two oldest HEIs. Researchers from Asia and wider international HE illustrate how private sector students have distinctive advantages in labour markets. Hao and Welch (2012) argue that graduates from prestigious HEIs hold capitals which allow them easy access to the labour market due to employers' recognition. Through employer engagement programmes, graduates have work exposure and thus have confidence and knowledge of norms and values of the working world (Tomlinson, 2017).

A similar form of cultural capital exists among state graduates from engineering, law, and medicine in Sri Lanka. Their credentials allow easy access to the labour market because they have a higher perceived value than graduates from arts and humanities (Lee and Chen, 2017). These degrees are designed with long-term training, giving students enough time for graduates to embody the cultural values and norms.

Although many researchers perceive the English language as a communication skill and positioned under traditional skills, in the Asian context, it has a much higher cultural capital (Bolton, 2008). As a former British colony, Sri Lanka values English language skills, which are seen as carrying powerful symbolic and cultural capital (Hey, 1997) and the understanding of the rules of the game (Morrison, 2014). English becomes more powerful when combined with a transnational, taught in English or private university degree and often with an industrial placement (Hettige, 2000). Conversely, individuals with lower English skills and access to private HEIs, struggle to access high level jobs in the private sector (Hettige, 2000).

Developing Social Capitals

Social capital is the aggregate of potential resources linked to a durable network, institutionalised relationships, mutual acquaintance, and recognition (Bourdieu, 1986). These institutionalised relationships help graduates to find and secure jobs (Blackmore *et al.*, 2017). The more points of social connection a graduate makes, the more knowledgeable and trustworthy they become (Tomlinson, 2017). In the context of Sri Lanka, private university

graduates, mainly from upper class and upper middle-class backgrounds have ties through their family and friends, arming them with insider knowledge.

Putnam's (1999) analysis of bonding and bridging ties illustrates social capital. Bonding ties are based on interaction among members of a group that maintains unity and cohesion and are based on homogeneity (Verhaeghe *et al.*, 2015). Most private university graduates are from elite groups that have networks based on homogeneity. Professional networks, including university alumni, are part of the same social group. These bonding ties provide insider knowledge to the graduates that helps them gain insight into labour market opportunities. It also shows them as gatekeepers to an employer (Tomlinson, 2017). Furthermore, employers tend to trust graduates from their social groups.

Bridging ties refers to interaction with people who are external to the group (Putnam, 1999). Literature suggests a strong career guidance unit can play a bridging role for graduates (Purcell *et al.*, 2012). Career guidance units in private universities play a bridging role which aids graduates to exploit employment opportunities (Chandrakumara, 2015), but such units are not well developed in state universities. Political connections operate as a bridging tie for state sector graduates (Hettige, 2000). These connections assist graduates to avail opportunities and insider knowledge (Hettige, 2000; UGC 2018).

Capitals have been used in the West to elucidate reasons for students' distinctive advantage in various employment fields (Verhaeghe *et al.*, 2015). However, literature has identified that capital which supports employment can differ based on context (Nguyen, 2023), as cultural capital is dependent on local labor systems, which can be different in non-western societies (Nguyen, 2023). The importance of networks in some societies such as in China and the Middle East can also influence the role of social capital (Tran *et al.*, 2021; Alizadeh Majd *et al.*, 2024).

This research adopts a capitals lens rather than a narrow definition of employability skills because in comparison to graduates from private HEIs, who frequently have higher levels of capitals, many Sri Lankan state HE graduates still struggle to secure graduate jobs despite participating in employability programs. Private university graduates often have higher cultural capitals for their credentials, and English communication skills, giving them a distinct labour market advantage. Bourdieu's capitals provide an overarching construct to position

the study, moving from short term skills development to the longer-term acquisition of life-long social and cultural capital (Tomlinson, 2017).

Research into employability in developing economies remains limited and underrepresented. There is a dearth of research into employability within the Sri Lankan context and no existing research considers the perspective of academic and strategic leaders. This research addresses this lacuna, seeking to develop and reconcile understanding around the definition of employability and how its development can be conceptualised in terms of capitals rather than as a set of skills, by understanding how Sri Lankan HE administrators conceptualize employability and what capitals they perceive need to be developed to achieve employability.

Methodology

To explore how Sri Lankan HE administrators conceptualise employability and what capitals they perceive as needing development to achieve employability, the research sought to obtain the views of senior experts in Sri Lankan HE. To achieve this, an interpretivist research approach was adopted to explore and interpret the views of Sri Lankan Vice Chancellors and officials within the funding council, UGC. These two groups were identified as administrators within the system whose conceptualisation of employability helps to frame policy. It was determined that to effectively achieve the research aim, there would be value in obtaining data from both VCs and a senior member of the UGC, as this would bridge the viewpoints of the funder and the VCs, who whilst working together on a common goal are autonomous from one another (UGC, 2018). This helps to triangulate the conceptualization of employability and what capitals are perceived as needing development to achieve employability within HE administration. Consistent with exploratory research, it was determined that semi-structured interviews would be the most appropriate data collection method, as this would allow the education administrators to express and share their own views regarding the options being explored (Creswell, 2013). It also allowed the study to meet ethical standards, given that the total population is small and therefore, whilst producing depth of insight, it could still be balanced with the anonymity of the participants. The research received ethical approval from Lancaster University's Educational Research Ethics Committee.

Data collection and analysis

A sample of four VCs of Sri Lankan HEIs and the Senior Director of the Funding Council, within the UGC, who is responsible for government budget allocations to HEIs was developed for the research. The four VCs selected were members of the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Directors (CVCD), the committee which advises and makes recommendations to the Funding Commission (CVCD, 2018) and represented 27% of the leadership of the country's publicly funded universities. Two of them are from an arts and humanities background, one from Social Sciences, and one is from science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) disciplines. Almost all of them have over 40 years of experience in industry and academia. A summary of the sample is included in table one.

Table One: Sample Profile

Interview Participant Demographic Profiles					
Disciplinary Background	Medicine	Medicine	Arts & humanities	Technology	Social science
Gender	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male
Years in HE	8+	30+	20+	25+	20+
Interviewer Participant Employment Profiles					
Type of Institution	Single Unitary body	Prestigious research and teaching institution	Research and teaching institution	Vocational research and teaching institution	Inclusivity driven vocational teaching institution
HEI Founded	1970s	Pre 1950s	1980s	1990s	2000s
Context of Institution	Manages all funding for publicly supported universities	All disciplines	All disciplines	All disciplines, except medicine	All disciplines, except medicine
Undergraduate Students Supported	110,000+	11,000+	8,000+	5,800+	4,800+
Participant code	UGC	VC1	VC2	VC3	VC4

Table developed by authors

The research participants were identified through a snowball sampling process based on recommendations received from sector experts and the funding council. A purposeful approach allowed the selection of participants with the requisite information and who were willing to provide honest and reliable answers (Creswell, 2013). A snowballing process was chosen as it is an effective strategy for reaching difficult to research populations, such as senior managers or government officials (Sadler, 2010). It is also an effective strategy when discussing potentially awkward, controversial, or challenging subjects, where honesty and openness are important (Waters, 2015). To get an understanding of how administrators conceptualized employability, it was important to get an honest understanding of their own personal views, actions and policy positions.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in English using an interview guide to help ensure validity. A summary of the interview questions is provided in appendix 1. The interviews allowed for the uncovering of participants conceptions of employability, and which capitals they believed should be established in curriculum and inform policy, which required dialogic exchange (Gall et al., 2003). The semi-structured interviews were held face-to-face and were conducted over 1 hour to 1 and a half hours. Interviews were held at each participant's institution. Only the researcher and the participant were in the room, which allowed interviewees to be comfortable, honest, and upfront about their ideas to support trustworthiness (Wahyuni, 2012). The interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants and then transcribed, allowing the researchers to follow a reflexive process.

Thematic analysis was undertaken manually by highlighting relevant text to find codes, and then identify reoccurring themes. To support developing an understanding of employability in the Sri Lankan context, an inductive bottom-up approach, which did not employ pre-existing codes was adopted (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The analysis process led to the identification of two themes regarding how employability was conceptualised and three themes regarding what was perceived as needing to be developed to achieve employability.

Results

The first part of the results presents themes as to how Sri Lankan HE administrators conceptualize employability. This highlights that employability was conceptualised as requiring transferable skills and job specific occupational skills. The second part of the results

addresses the second research question, detailing what capitals Sri Lankan HE administrators perceive need to be developed. The themes identified highlighted the development of cultural and social capital and a proficiency in the English language as being important in supporting employability.

Conceptualisation of employability

Developing transferrable skills

The overarching conception of employability is practical and applied, with an emphasis on developing transferable skills. There was a focus on developing both technical and non-technical transferable skills. The importance of developing generic capabilities such as evaluation skills, teamworking, information technology, communicating, and leadership skills is highlighted in the following excerpts. This resonates with Sri Lankan literature such as Ariyawansa (2008) and Chandrakumara (2015), and Western literature such as Jackson (2013).

"To solve their problems, we have to develop analytical skills. If we make them in that way they can face any challenges, any unforeseen challenges." (VC3)

"Those are the things we teach them, through the career guidance unit we teach them various skills such as leadership skills, team working skills." (VC1)

"Such as personality development, how they can face interviews, communicating, certain work environments, how they can develop themselves."

(VC1)

Although respondents do not demonstrate a broad understanding, they show an understanding of some elements of the main skills and indicator skills. Personality and/or self-development are important elements of the self-management skills, previously suggested to be indicator skills (Chandrakumara, 2015). However, none of the respondents extended their ideas to specific skills such as caring for others and volunteering which previously have been suggested as important (Chandrakumara, 2015).

Communication skills were also mentioned in the discussions. Although focus has only been given to developing English language skills, consistent with prior research in the Sri Lanka; it did not extend to developing other important languages such as Sinhala and Tamil,

disagreeing with Chandrakumara (2015) and Ariyawansa (2008). These participants do not perceive developing other languages as imperative to enhancing the employability of graduates:

"We must develop good English communication skills because business in the private sector is conducted in English." (VC4)

"Students should be fluent in English because that is the official language in the Sri Lankan business world." (UGC)

Developing occupational skills

Most interviewees discussed the importance of developing occupational skills and job specific skills as a part of the employability agenda. In this regard, two main streams were identified – developing disciplinary specific skills and designing courses oriented to specific jobs. The following statement evidences the first stream.

"...we were focusing on developing courses with... subject specific occupational skills, such as insurance, banking, and accountancy. In agriculture we have plantation management, biotechnology, horticulture, and food science. These graduates hold the skills for the job, such as specific competencies, technical skills, and any software skills where necessary, therefore it is much easier for them to secure this job in the market. This is why our graduate employability ratio is 80%." (VC3)

This resonates with Sri Lankan literature such as Ariyawansa (2008) and Chandrakumara (2015) and the HETC project definition of employability. However, it contradicts the claims made by Western writers (e.g., Jackson, 2013; Römgens, *et al.*, 2020).

Considering the development of job-oriented programmes, some interviewees revealed their discontent regarding the arts and humanities. Participants made policy decisions to connect such degrees with other curricula to produce a job. These are evident in the following statements.

"In the past we have made a mistake by recruiting students into the arts stream (rather) than technical subjects. Unlike other streams there are problems in

relation to jobs for Arts. Universities are still following the old style and don't want to change." (VC4)

"[I have thought] why don't we develop a teaching component as a part of their programme? So, it will then be in their transcript. And to train graduates in science to teach [not in the mother tongue] but in English. They will be hired by the ministry of Education so they will have a guaranteed job at the end of their degree". (UGC)

The Funding Council official's argument reflects the notion of employability skills in the Sri Lankan HE sector; they are mainly focusing on specific occupations. These academic administrators echo the recommendations made by the UGC (2018) where they advise reducing student numbers for arts and humanity subjects. The second excerpt discusses the importance of incorporating a professional qualification into specific degree programmes consistent with the literature (Römgens *et al.*, 2020).

Through the capital lens the data from the above extracts are premised on augmenting cultural capital through occupational skills. In nature, they are not transferrable from one discipline to another. This contradicts the arguments made by Cassidy (2006) and Cotton (2001).

Developing capitals

Cultural capital

Social skills remain of major importance when accessing specific jobs (Kosseck, 2000). This emerged in the interviews regarding employability skills. From the responses it was evident that they are prioritising developing capitals as they could sense that state sector students are lacking something more than generic skills. The following excerpt illustrates this well.

"When we think about ... subject knowledge our students are very good, but when it comes to student's grooming, private universities are far above the state sector. They have specific activities such as annual balls, exchange programmes, and other mentoring schemes to develop their students from day one. I have seen students from private universities and foreign universities in recruitment activities. The way they approach a question, how they behave,

their communication style, and how they blend is very different from our students (state funded graduates). We cannot teach these skills overnight to our students. But these skills decide who gets the job.” (VC1).

Although this respondent does not use the term capitals, he is trying to elucidate the reasons behind the state sector's graduate employability problems. This statement shows the importance of developing students' cultural capital (embodiment state) and how private universities are better at developing it. The suggestion is that the private sector graduates are exposed to extracurricular activities which shape them and can have a potentially transformative impact on students' identities. By exposing them to these activities from the early stages of their degree programme, these have been embodied into their personalities (Kalfa and Taksa, 2015). Employer engagement programmes such as mentoring, help them to understand the rules of the game in different professional groups (Tomlinson, 2017; Smith, 2010). The ability to follow these rules allow individuals' membership of the group, which gives them an advantage over the state sector (Smith, 2010). Therefore, higher cultural capital positions the private university graduates distinctively in the labour market. This is consistent with Hao and Welch (2012) and Smith (2010).

State sector graduates do not have this long- term exposure, or the extra- curricular activities to develop their cultural capitals. The statement illustrates why they fall behind in the job market. This is not the case in STEM-specific programmes. Their three-year professional training exposes them to the professional group which allows them to gain insider knowledge (Lee and Chen, 2017). Therefore, they can transform their identity whilst learning the rules of the game. This provides them with a competitive advantage in the labour market, as VC1 articulates:

“We do not have similar problem with our STEM and law students. I am not sure what it is (probably their training) but they have a better understanding of the job market, and they seem to be well equipped.”.

Therefore, there is a higher need to expose undergraduate students from state sector universities, especially the arts and humanities students, to transform their identity and support positioning themselves in the labour market (consistent with Hao and Welch, 2012; Kalfa and Taksa, 2015).

Proficiency in English Language

Fluency in English is perceived as a cultural capital of the upper class; and an extra qualification for all. This finding echoes the findings of Morrison (2012), who found that accents can be important for supporting employability. The following excerpt from a VC explains this well.

“Fluency in English is a very valuable currency in the job market. It is not only about just writing with perfect grammar but communicating well with people. Unlike private sector universities, our students are mainly from traditional backgrounds where English is not spoken at home. They struggle in job interviews because it is harder for them to communicate and articulate their ideas effectively. A person who is highly competent in the English language is much more confident than a candidate who is not, and it elevates them to a higher social status automatically. It's as simple as that. So, employers prefer private sector graduates to ours.” (VC2)

The data makes the argument for state sector universities to focus on not only developing academic English but also business English, as argued by Hettige (2000) and Kalfa and Taksa (2015).

Developing social capitals

Students who have appropriate social capital have an increased opportunity to secure a better job than their counterparts who do not because they have more accessible communities (Marcotte *et al.*, 2007). These networks provide important social capitals which have a significant impact on a student's future career.

“I have seen the network operated in the private sector universities. Some of their work placements are with international companies. They have so many

contacts with overseas organisations. Already most students are from affluent families and have a good network... they can secure a job easily. Unfortunately, this is not the case with us.. Our students are not ignorant; they know their work and subject. You [also] need the network.” (VC3)

“Some jobs e.g., senior estate jobs, are dedicated only for students who are from certain universities. They don't look for anything else. Similarly with some international bank jobs. It is because of their networks they have access to those jobs.” (VC4)

The first statement confirms the argument made by Knight and Yueh (2008) who discuss the importance of referrals in recruitment, or associational affiliations. It also discusses the importance of bonding and bridging ties (Putnam, 1999). Both of these ties provide an insider knowledge to the job seeker, which helps them explicate the importance of roles such as gate keepers in a recruitment activity (Tomlinson, 2017). With that knowledge graduates can devise their approaches to seek and secure specific employment opportunities (Small *et al.*, 2018). The second statement further confirms the importance of networks and the value of developing them (Putnam, 1999).

Conclusions and Recommendations

The aim of the research was to understand how Sri Lankan HE administrators conceptualise employability and what capitals they perceived were needed to be developed to achieve employability. To achieve this, five influential policy stakeholders were engaged in exploratory, dialogic, semi-structured interviews to understand their notions of employability. The lens of Bourdieu's capitals was used to frame the views as to what capitals were required to support employability. The results help to locate the perceived foundations of employability that can be used to frame HE curriculum and contribute to and inform policy development in Sri Lanka to develop an aligned and contextualised curriculum (Bell and Cui, 2023). Interviewees demonstrated a comprehensive conception of employability, and they discussed the importance of developing generic skills and social and cultural capitals. However, there are some gaps around becoming job ready. Hence, they believe every degree programme should link with a professional qualification to make degree holders more

employable. This perception demonstrates the need for clarity around employability frameworks in Sri Lankan HE.

The results show the applicability of Bourdieu's (1986) concepts of capitals in the Sri Lankan HE context, with English language playing a particularly important role in Sri Lanka. It also identifies the importance of social and cultural capitals when a graduate enters the labour market. Analysis and literature show that even with a good set of transferable skills, employers still prefer private sector graduates as they have better cultural and social capitals. Therefore, state sector universities need to build graduates' social and cultural capitals through various schemes, such as long-term mentoring and placement programmes, especially for arts and humanities students. This will allow those students to understand the rules of the game according to Bourdieu's conception. By exposing them to such schemes it will embed the cultural value of employers in students' minds. Social and cultural capitals will enhance their self-confidence and re-form their identity, which can help them succeed in the labour market.

English language remains a materially significant cultural capital. Fluency in English is important for success in finding jobs. By using English as a medium of the degree programmes and collaborations with international institutions, universities can develop students' confidence in English language.

Social capitals were seen as important to secure private sector jobs. Possessing the right kind of social capital gives the holder insider knowledge of employer organisations that then allows them to understand gate keepers and the availability of vacancies. Employer engagement programmes could be used to gain insider knowledge. Also, strong university alumni could be used as bonding capitals, as they are based around similar graduates but are successful in their professional lives. Furthermore, strong career guidance units are needed as bridging capitals for students.

Whilst research offers an initial step in understanding employability and the required capitals in Sri Lanka, the work has several limitations. This work provides a starting point by qualitatively exploring the views of five influential HE administrators. Whilst the sample was purposely selected to cover administrators from a range of institutions through a snowballing approach in a bid to achieve honest and reliable answers from a difficult to reach population (Waters, 2015), a limitation of snowball sampling is that it can lead to the selection of

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likeminded people. Additionally, this research only considered one viewpoint that of HE administrators. Thus, future research might examine alternative perspectives and include more stakeholders. As there is potential that academic conceptualisations, might not match the requirements in practice (Al Kharusi et al., 2023). Educational leaders may have backward-looking views, and thus future research might examine how new technologies like artificial intelligence may influence employability (Bell and Bell, 2023). This research was undertaken in the context of Sri Lanka; however, some of the findings might have transferability to other contexts. For example, the importance and value of the English language capital might be valued in other developing countries, where tourism and international trade are important parts of the economy. Social capital might also be valuable in similar contexts where networks exist and there is limited social mobility.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1) In your opinion what are the priorities for Sri Lankan HE for the next 10 years?

2) What do you think employability is?

Follow up – What skills do you consider are important?

3) “Employability skills of STEM students are different from Arts and Humanities students”,

What do you think about this statement?

Follow up – Do you agree or disagree? Why?

4) In your opinion how can a university incorporate employability into the curriculum?

Follow up – Do you think the state sector is doing this well? Are there any differences to the private universities?

5) How do you think Sri Lankan Higher Education can enhance the employability of undergraduate students?