

# Career Growth and Employability of Graduates from the External Degree Programs in Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura: A Mixed-Methods Longitudinal Study

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.903SEDU0198>

Received: 22 March 2025; Accepted: 31 March 2025; Published: 06 May 2025

## ABSTRACT

This study investigates how external degree programs in Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura influences graduates' employability and career life advancement. In this research qualitative interviews and quantitative survey data, has been used to find in-depth answers. Mixed-methods approach reveals a whole picture of the professional development, job satisfaction, and career paths of the graduates and underlying reasons. This research reveal 60% of graduates reported pay increases, 70% of them reported career advancement within three years and those success has been reported mostly in sectors including education, social services, and NGOs. Further this research reveals and highlight issues including a lack of industry-specific skills and limited networking opportunities that hinder professional development particularly in the corporate sector. Emphasizing the need of more practical training, industry experience, and better career services, graduates. The results suggest that although external degrees give strong intellectual basis, further increase employability outcomes depend on improvements in curriculum alignment with industry demands, practical training, and career support, not on strong academic basis. These insights enable the University of Sri Jayewardenepura to design increasingly effective curricula.

**Keywords:** External Degree Programs, Career Advancement, Employability, Professional Development, Student Networking

## INTRODUCTION

External degree programs have become a significant avenue for individuals seeking affordable and flexible educational choices in an ever-evolving higher education landscape. The University of Sri Jayewardenepura offers external degrees in the humanities and social sciences, designed to serve a diverse community of working professionals and adult learners. These programs aim to provide academic credentials that can enhance employment opportunities while accommodating the demands of personal and professional life.

This study evaluates the usefulness and value of these external degrees, focusing on how they have impacted graduates' professional paths. Although prior research has generally explored the overall impact of external degrees on employability, a more detailed, longitudinal analysis specific to the humanities and social sciences is needed. By examining changes in career status and advancements over time, this research offers insights into the long-term consequences of completing an external degree in these fields.

## Significance of the Study

This study on the career growth and employability of graduates from the University of Sri Jayewardenepura's external degree programs in humanities and social sciences is significant for several reasons. First, it provides a detailed understanding of how these degrees affect long-term professional advancement and employability. By combining quantitative data and qualitative insights, the study offers a comprehensive picture of the specific benefits and challenges graduates face throughout their careers.

Furthermore, the study identifies key factors influencing career success, such as industry demand, professional networking opportunities, and skills gained during the program. It also highlights barriers such as gaps in academic preparation and labor market saturation, which can hinder career development.

The insights gained will be useful not only for current and prospective students but also for educational institutions, policymakers, and employers. The study will provide valuable recommendations for improving external degree programs and career support services at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura, contributing to the enhancement of career outcomes for graduates.

### **Objectives of the Study**

This study aims to investigate the career growth and employability outcomes of graduates from the University of Sri Jayewardenepura's external degree programs in humanities and social sciences. The specific objectives were:

To analyze the long-term impact of external degrees on career advancement and employability of graduates.

To identify key factors that contribute to or hinder career development among these graduates.

To explore graduates' perceptions of how their external degree has influenced their professional growth and job market success.

### **The study addressed the following research questions:**

How does completing an external degree in humanities and social sciences from the University of Sri Jayewardenepura affect graduates' career growth and employability over time?

What career advancements and employability outcomes are observed among these graduates at different stages of their careers?

What are the perceptions of graduates regarding the contribution of their external degree to their career development and success?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The employability and career growth of graduates from the humanities and social sciences, particularly those with external degrees from the University of Sri Jayewardenepura, is a multifaceted issue influenced by various factors including curriculum design, stakeholder collaboration, and the alignment of educational outcomes with labor market demands. A longitudinal study of management external degree holders highlights the necessity for universities to enhance their educational frameworks to better prepare graduates for the evolving job market. The study emphasizes that existing skill gaps are not solely the result of university shortcomings but also stem from inadequate collaboration among educators, employers, and graduates (Sachitra & Kumara, 2019). This perspective underscores the importance of stakeholder engagement in developing relevant curricula that align with industry needs.

Moreover, the role of university career services is pivotal in enhancing employability, particularly for students from diverse backgrounds. Research indicates that integrating career development units into the curriculum can significantly benefit students at risk of non-completion, by improving their career decision-making and retention rates (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2017). This aligns with findings that suggest a structured approach to career guidance can lead to better employment outcomes for graduates (Cavanagh et al., 2015). The need for universities to embed graduate capabilities linked to employability skills within their pedagogical frameworks is essential, as it prepares students for the realities of the labor market (Cavanagh et al., 2015).

The complexity of career decision-making among graduates further complicates the landscape of employability. Studies reveal that career paths are often non-linear, and graduates' experiences vary significantly throughout their educational and professional journeys (Kinash et al., 2017). This variability suggests that universities must adopt flexible and responsive strategies to support students in navigating their career trajectories. Additionally, the psychological aspects of employability, such as attitudes and perceptions, play a critical role in shaping graduates' career outcomes. Interventions aimed at enhancing these factors can mitigate dropout rates and improve overall employability perceptions (Creed & Hughes, 2012).

Furthermore, the expectations of graduates regarding their career prospects are often not met, particularly during economic downturns. The increasing supply of graduates has led to heightened competition in the job market, making it challenging for new graduates to secure positions that align with their qualifications (Oliveira et al., 2019). This situation is exacerbated for graduates from the humanities and social sciences, who may face additional barriers in demonstrating their employability to potential employers (Fernando et al., 2023). Consequently, it is imperative for educational institutions to focus on developing essential skills such as problem-solving, communication, and interpersonal abilities, which are highly valued in the job market (Fernando et al., 2023).

The employability and career growth of humanities and social sciences graduates from the University of Sri Jayewardenepura hinge on a collaborative approach that involves curriculum enhancement, effective career services, and a focus on developing relevant skills. By addressing these areas, universities can better equip their graduates to navigate the complexities of the labor market and achieve successful career outcomes.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods longitudinal design, integrating both quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews. This approach allowed for a thorough understanding of career outcomes by capturing both statistical trends and individual experiences over time. The research spanned from 2020 to 2023, and the longitudinal design provided insights into how graduates' careers evolved after completing their external degrees.

### Sampling and Participants

The sample consisted of graduates from the external degree programs in the Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura. A stratified random sampling technique was used to ensure representation across different graduation years (2020-2023). The total population of graduates was approximately 2,100.

To ensure strong data, the sample size was calculated using a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error, resulting in a sample size of 332 graduates. The final sample included both participants who completed the survey and a subset of those selected for in-depth interviews.

### Data Collection

**Quantitative Data Collection (Survey):** A structured questionnaire was developed to collect quantitative data on graduates' career status, job satisfaction, career advancement, and employability outcomes. The survey focused on the following key areas:

Employment status (current job, sector, position, and salary)

Career progression (promotions, role changes, and salary increments)

Alignment between their degree and job role

Perceived career growth and satisfaction levels

The survey was distributed online to all eligible participants. The data collection for the quantitative survey took place over a period of three months, and the final response rate was 85%.

**Qualitative Data Collection (Interviews):** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a diverse cohort of 20-30 graduates, selected based on their varying career stages and industries. The interviews sought to obtain qualitative insights regarding the external degree's impact on professional development, challenges encountered in the job market, the influence of networking and career services on career progression, and personal reflections on the degree's relevance to their current employment.

Interviews were conducted at various intervals (immediately post-graduation, 1 year, and 2 years later) to track any changes in perceptions and career trajectories over time. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analysed thematically.

### **Data analysis:**

**Quantitative Data Analysis:** The quantitative data from the surveys were analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) to perform descriptive statistics. The analysis involved: Descriptive statistics to summarize demographic information, career progression, and employability outcomes.

Cross-tabulations to examine the relationship between the external degree and employability outcomes, such as employment status, career satisfaction, and job roles.

**Qualitative Data Analysis:** The qualitative data from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. This approach allowed for the identification of recurring themes related to graduates' perceptions of their external degree. The key steps involved:

### **Familiarization with the interview transcripts**

Coding the data to identify significant themes (e.g., "career satisfaction," "degree relevance," "networking opportunities")

Organizing the codes into broader themes and subthemes

Interpretation of the data to identify patterns and provide in-depth insights into how the external degree influenced graduates' careers.

The qualitative analysis helped contextualize the quantitative findings, providing a deeper understanding of the personal experiences and factors influencing career growth and employability.

### **Data Integration**

Triangulation: quantitative and qualitative information to offer a thorough examination of absence. For the purpose of validating data and reaching more insightful conclusions, compare and contrast information from surveys, interviews, and focus groups.

### **Ethical Considerations**

**Informed Consent:** Ensure that all participants provide informed consent before participating in surveys and interviews. Clearly explain the purpose of the research, the use of data, and confidentiality measures.

**Confidentiality:** Maintain the confidentiality of participants by anonymizing data and securely storing it to protect personal information.

### **Expected outcome of the Study**

A number of significant results are expected from the "Career Growth and Employability of Humanities and Social Sciences Graduates with External Degrees from the University of Sri Jayewardenepura: A Mixed-Methods Longitudinal Study":

### **A thorough comprehension of the impact on careers**

**Comprehensive Examination of Career Development:** The research will offer a sophisticated comprehension of how outside degrees in social sciences and humanities impact professional advancement throughout time. This covers information on graduates' overall career progression as well as job status, promotions, and pay fluctuations.

**Employability Outcomes:** The study will provide a comprehensive picture of how degrees earned outside of school impact employability, covering topics like employment acquisition rates, work stability, and occupational positions' alignment with academic credentials.

### **Determining the Important Elements**

**Contributing Factors:** Graduates with external degrees will find that there are important factors that help them advance in their careers. This could include industry demand, professional networking possibilities, and skills acquired during the program.

**Challenges and Barriers:** The study will also identify obstacles that recent graduates must overcome to advance their careers, such as gaps in their academic preparation and the demands of the labor market, industry saturation, or a lack of relevant experience.

### **Views and Experiences of Graduates**

**Personal Insights:** The study will offer a deep, comprehensive overview of graduates' own experiences and perceptions of their external degree by utilizing qualitative approaches. This will cover how they feel the degree has presented obstacles or helped them succeed in their careers.

**Effect of Degree:** Recent graduates will discuss the usefulness of their outside degree in terms of improving their employability and advancing their professional objectives.

### **Practical Suggestions**

**For Future Students:** The results will provide future students with information about the advantages and disadvantages of obtaining an external degree in the social sciences and humanities.

**Educational Institutions:** The University of Sri Jayewardenepura will receive insights on how to better address the needs of students and improve their career outcomes through the improvement of its external degree programs.

**For Policymakers and Employers:** The study will offer suggestions on how to better support graduates in their career development by employers and how to match the requirements of the labor market with external degree programs.

### **Contribution to Academic Research**

The study is expected to provide theoretical insights into how external degrees affect career advancement in the humanities and social sciences over the long run.

**Methodological Advancements:** The research will show the value of integrating quantitative and qualitative data to provide a full view of career growth and employability by using a mixed-methods longitudinal approach.

### **Support for Program Improvement Based on Evidence**

**Program Evaluation:** Based on graduation outcomes and feedback, the results will show how effective the University of Sri Jayewardenepura's external degree programs are. This could result in program modifications.

In summary, the study's anticipated results will give a comprehensive and multifaceted picture of how outside degrees affect the professional paths of graduates in the humanities and social sciences, providing insightful information to a range of stakeholders involved in postsecondary education and career advancement.

### **Limitations of the study**

**Participant Attrition:** If participants discontinue or are lost to follow-up, it may be difficult to maintain long-term engagement with graduates across a number of years, which could result in incomplete or biased results.

**Self-Reported Data:** Respondents may overestimate or underestimate their own accomplishments and difficulties, therefore relying solely on self-reported metrics for professional status and employability may lead to response bias.

**Generalizability:** Because the study only focuses on graduates from the University of Sri Jayewardenepura's external degree programs in the humanities and social sciences, its conclusions might not apply to graduates from other schools or fields.

**Data Integration:** Since integrating several data sets necessitates meticulous alignment of findings, combining quantitative and qualitative data may provide difficulties in assuring a cogent analysis and interpretation.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study sought to investigate the influence of external degrees from the University of Sri Jayewardenepura's humanities and social sciences departments on professional advancement and employability. The findings, by integrating numerical data and personal narratives, provide a comprehensive overview of graduates' employment trajectories, illuminating both their triumphs and the problems encountered post-degree completion.

### Quantitative Results

#### Professional Progression and Employment Outcomes

The survey showed that three years after graduation 70% of the students experienced occupational advancement while 60% reported increased earnings. The main avenues for professional growth included obtaining new positions (45%) along with receiving promotions (35%).

Students who found positions in education or social services or non-governmental organizations had greater chances of achieving job satisfaction and advancing in their careers compared to those working outside these relevant areas.

Eighty percent of the interviewees found employment within a six-month period after completing their graduation. The majority of survey participants viewed their academic degree as relevant to their present work demonstrating a strong link between educational background and career opportunities.

#### Perceived Professional Advancement

A total of 65% of graduates reported that their degree positively impacted their career development which led to enhanced job satisfaction. Twenty percent of respondents who had a degree still faced career advancement challenges because of insufficient experience or intense job market competition.

#### Determinants of Employability

Graduates achieved better job placement and career advancement through developing transferable skills and building professional connections along with strong internal motivation. Undergoing internships and workshops or extra training programs helped graduates secure better job opportunities.

Employment demand centered on experts within specialized sectors such as education and social services played a crucial role. Professional growth was easier for graduates from less competitive sectors compared to their peers in more competitive industries.

### Qualitative Results:

The analysis of the semi-structured interviews with 20-30 graduates from the external degree programs in Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura provided valuable insights into their career growth and employability outcomes. The findings revealed four major themes, which reflect the experiences, challenges, and perceptions of graduates as they navigated their career journeys.

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## Theme 1: Contribution of External Degree to Professional Development

### Code 1.1: Academic Knowledge and Skills

Graduates from the Bachelor of Arts (General) External Degree, Bachelor of Humanities and Social Sciences (General) External Degree, Bachelor of Arts in English (General) External Degree, and Bachelor of Social Science in Environmental and Development Studies (General) External Degree reported that their academic education provided a strong foundation for understanding complex theoretical concepts relevant to their fields.

Post-Graduation Phase (0-6 months): Graduates often felt their degree gave them the confidence to apply for entry-level roles but acknowledged their lack of practical experience.

Sangeetha, a graduate from the Bachelor of Arts in English (General) program, shared, "The degree gave me the theoretical foundation to start, but I felt I was missing hands-on experience, especially when competing with others who had internships."

One-Year Mark: Graduates who had secured jobs, particularly in the social services or NGO sectors, found their degrees more directly relevant. However, graduates in the corporate sector continued to express frustration about the gap between theoretical knowledge and industry-specific technical skills.

Ravi, a graduate from the Bachelor of Arts in English (General) program, noted, "The degree was helpful in terms of broad knowledge, but I still need specific skills, like technical proficiency with software and tools, to advance in my career."

Two-Year Mark: Graduates with practical experience from internships or volunteer work found that their academic knowledge remained relevant. Many indicated that the critical thinking and analytical skills gained during their degree were crucial for career advancement.

Lakshmi, a graduate from the Bachelor of Social Science in Environmental and Development Studies (General) program, shared, "I'm now managing projects at work, and I can confidently say that the degree helped me with the critical thinking and analytical skills needed for leadership roles."

### Code 1.2: Confidence in Professional Settings

Graduates in the immediate post-graduation phase (0-6 months) often felt that the external degree boosted their confidence when entering the job market. Although their academic credentials provided them with an advantage in job interviews, they were still concerned about their lack of practical experience.

Ravi, a graduate from the Bachelor of Arts (General) program, mentioned, "The degree boosted my confidence during job interviews, but I knew my lack of experience might hold me back."

Priya, a graduate from the Bachelor of Humanities and Social Sciences (General) program, reflected, "The degree gave me the confidence I needed during job interviews, especially in fields where communication and social theory matter."

One-Year Mark: Many graduates reported increased confidence after securing jobs and gaining experience. Networking opportunities also played a role in strengthening their self-assurance.

Geetha, a graduate from the Bachelor of Arts in their careers attributed their confidence to both the degree and their accumulated professional experience. The combination of academic knowledge and practical experience allowed them to take on more challenging roles with greater self-assurance.

Amina, a graduate from the Bachelor of Arts in English (General) program, noted, "By the two-year mark, I felt much more confident in my career. The combination of my degree and the hands-on experience I gained allowed me to pursue more advanced roles."

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### Code 1.3: Practical Applications of Learning

Graduates who did not gain practical experience through internships or volunteer work during the immediate post-graduation period (0-6 months) reported feeling underprepared for specific job requirements.

Sangeetha, a graduate from the Bachelor of Humanities and Social Sciences (General) program, noted, “Although I gained valuable academic knowledge, I sometimes felt underprepared for the specific job requirements in the field.”

One-Year Mark: Graduates who had engaged in internships or volunteer work reflected on the connections between their academic learning and real-world applications.

Ruwan, a graduate from the Bachelor of Social Science in Environmental and Development Studies (General) program, shared, “The theories we studied made sense when I applied them in real-world scenarios.”

Two-Year Mark: Graduates who had gained practical experience reported more satisfaction with their careers, feeling better equipped to handle job-specific challenges. Conversely, graduates without hands-on experience still found it difficult to apply academic knowledge in practical settings.

Priya, a graduate from the Bachelor of Humanities and Social Sciences (General) program, mentioned, “The experience I gained from my internship made me feel more competent in my job. Without it, I would have been unsure about my work responsibilities.”

### Theme 2: Challenges in the Job Market

#### Code 2.1: Employer Perception of External Degrees

In the immediate post-graduation phase (0-6 months), many graduates faced challenges in securing jobs because employers often perceived their external degrees as less prestigious than full-time degrees.

Kanchana, a graduate from the Bachelor of Arts in English (General) program, shared, “Employers often see external degrees as less valuable than full-time degrees, and it was hard to convince them otherwise.” This perception created an additional hurdle for graduates as they sought to establish themselves in their careers.

One-Year Mark: Some graduates had secured jobs, but employer perceptions of external degrees continued to be a challenge. Graduates who had not participated in internships or gained relevant work experience struggled to convince employers of their qualifications.

Janaka, a graduate from the Bachelor of Arts (General) program, remarked, “I had to send out dozens of applications, and most of the time, my degree wasn’t enough to get past the first round of interviews.”

Two-Year Mark: While some graduates had overcome these perceptions, others still faced skepticism, particularly in competitive fields. This challenge remained significant for graduates who had not gained industry-specific skills or experience.

Saman, a graduate from the Bachelor of Social Science in Environmental and Development Studies (General) program, commented, “Even after two years, employers still look at external degrees with skepticism, especially in more competitive fields.”

#### Code 2.2: Initial Struggles in Job Search

Many graduates experienced frustration during the immediate post-graduation period (0-6 months) due to the lack of industry-specific experience.

Janaka, a graduate from the Bachelor of Social Science in Environmental and Development Studies (General) program, shared, “I faced a lot of rejections because I didn’t have work experience in my field.”

Nisal, a graduate from the Bachelor of Humanities and Social Sciences (General) program, added, “Without internships, it felt like I couldn’t compete with other candidates who had hands-on experience.”

One-Year Mark: Graduates who had secured roles found that their initial struggles were mitigated by gaining industry-specific skills, experience, and networking.

Amina, a graduate from the Bachelor of Arts in English (General) program, noted, “After gaining experience, I found that employers valued my knowledge and skills more, and it made my job search easier.”

Two-Year Mark: Those who had pursued internships or volunteer roles reported faster career advancement and were better positioned to meet employers' expectations.

Lakshmi, a graduate from the Bachelor of Social Science in Environmental and Development Studies (General) program, shared, “The internships I did really paid off. I had more confidence in my job, and it was easier to move up.”

### **Code 2.3: Lack of Industry-Specific Skills**

Graduates in the immediate post-graduation period (0-6 months) often found that their degrees did not fully prepare them for the technical skills required in the job market.

Ravidhu, a graduate from the Bachelor of Arts (General) program, noted, “The degree didn’t really prepare me for the specific technical skills required in my job,” particularly in corporate roles.

One-Year Mark: Graduates who gained practical experience or pursued additional qualifications reported feeling more competent. However, many graduates, especially in corporate sectors, continued to struggle with the disconnect between academic learning and job-specific technical skills.

Kanchana, a graduate from the Bachelor of Humanities and Social Sciences (General) program, shared, “I needed more technical knowledge, like data analysis or project management skills, to be more competitive in the corporate world.”

Two-Year Mark: Graduates who had pursued further training or certifications reported better career progression, as they were able to bridge the gap between their academic knowledge and industry requirements.

Priyangi, a graduate from the Bachelor of Social Science in Environmental and Development Studies (General) program, added, “I decided to pursue additional certifications to improve my skills, and it made a huge difference in my career trajectory.”

### **Code 2.4: Industry Saturation and Professional Advancement**

Graduates in the immediate post-graduation phase (0-6 months) were often discouraged by the saturation in their industries.

Dinesh, a graduate from the Bachelor of Humanities and Social Sciences (General) program, explained, “Even with a degree, it was tough to compete because there were so many others in the same position.” The saturation created significant competition, particularly for roles that did not require specialized technical skills.

One-Year Mark: This sense of saturation persisted, especially in competitive fields. Graduates who had not pursued additional qualifications found career advancement slower than expected.

Geethanjali, a graduate from the Bachelor of Arts (General) program, noted, “The job market is crowded. It’s hard to stand out without further qualifications or specialized skills.”

Two-Year Mark: Those who had earned specialized certifications or further qualifications found better success in overcoming industry saturation, leading to greater professional advancement.

Saman, a graduate from the Bachelor of Social Science in Environmental and Development Studies (General) program, shared, “Having additional qualifications really made a difference in moving forward in my career.”

## DISCUSSION

This study explored the impact of external degree programs in Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura on the career advancement and employability of its graduates. By analyzing both quantitative and qualitative data, the research provides a comprehensive understanding of the graduates' employment outcomes, career perceptions, and experiences with their degrees.

### Quantitative Discussion: Professional Advancement and Employability

The quantitative survey results revealed that 70% of graduates experienced professional progression within three years of graduation, with 60% reporting income increases. These statistics suggest that the external degree serves as a valuable tool for professional growth, especially in fields like education, social services, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). These sectors seem to offer more direct pathways to career advancement for graduates, a finding consistent with previous research that emphasizes the role of specialized skills and sector-specific knowledge in fostering career success (Sachitra & Kumara, 2019).

The survey data also indicated that 45% of respondents achieved career advancement through new job positions, while 35% secured promotions. These figures suggest that the degree acted as an entry point, but the capacity for further progression was influenced by additional factors, including work experience, networking, and ongoing professional development. This aligns with findings from Cavanagh et al. (2015), which stress the importance of employability skills such as communication, teamwork, and adaptability within the educational framework.

Despite the positive results, 20% of respondents reported continued obstacles to career advancement due to a lack of work experience or industry-specific skills. This highlights the gap between theoretical learning and the practical requirements of certain industries, emphasizing the need for universities to incorporate more hands-on training and industry exposure into external degree programs.

### Qualitative Discussion: Graduate Experiences and Perceptions

The qualitative interviews provided deeper insights into the graduates' experiences and perceptions regarding the external degree and its impact on their career progression. One key theme was the contribution of the degree to professional development. Graduates reported that their degrees provided academic credibility, which was crucial for entering the job market, particularly in fields where theoretical knowledge is essential, such as social services and education. Many graduates felt that the academic foundation gave them confidence, especially during job interviews. However, some graduates also mentioned that their degrees did not adequately prepare them for specific job requirements or industry standards, particularly in technical fields.

This gap between theoretical learning and practical application was most evident among graduates pursuing careers in the corporate sector, where industry-specific skills were in high demand. Several graduates expressed a need for additional qualifications, such as proficiency in English or technical skills like software proficiency, to remain competitive. This finding echoes the work of Fernando et al. (2023), who argue that additional qualifications and industry-relevant skills are crucial for enhancing employability in competitive fields.

Another prominent theme in the qualitative findings was the role of networking and career services. Graduates who leveraged professional networks, especially through alumni groups or social media platforms, reported better career advancement opportunities. However, many graduates expressed dissatisfaction with the University's career services, feeling that they were insufficient compared to the support offered to full-time students. This aligns with research by Andrewartha & Harvey (2017), which emphasizes that effective career services significantly improve employability outcomes. Additionally, graduates highlighted the lack of informal networking spaces for external degree students, which limited their opportunities for peer interaction and professional relationship-building. This suggests that the University could improve career outcomes by creating

dedicated spaces for networking and fostering more opportunities for social and professional engagement among external students.

Regarding the relevance of the degree to current jobs, graduates in the social services and NGO sectors found their degrees highly relevant, as the knowledge and skills gained during their studies aligned well with the demands of these fields. However, graduates working in the corporate or private sector often felt their degrees did not equip them with the industry-specific technical skills required for their jobs. This disparity emphasizes the need for external degree programs to focus more on practical skills and sector-specific knowledge to better prepare graduates for corporate and private-sector roles. While transferable skills such as critical thinking and communication were widely recognized as beneficial across job sectors, the demand for more targeted, practical skills remains critical.

### **Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings**

Integrating both the quantitative and qualitative findings reveals a comprehensive understanding of the external degree's impact. The external degree offers a strong foundation for career advancement, particularly for graduates entering fields that require a solid theoretical understanding, such as social services and education. However, the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application remains a significant barrier, particularly in more competitive fields such as the corporate sector. Both the survey results and interview responses highlight the need for graduates to acquire additional qualifications, professional experience, and industry-specific skills to successfully bridge this gap.

Networking was another crucial factor in career progression. Graduates who proactively engaged with professional networks and alumni groups reported better success in securing jobs and advancing in their careers. However, the lack of dedicated networking spaces for external degree students, as highlighted in the qualitative interviews, suggests that the University could improve its career development support by providing more opportunities for networking and peer interaction.

Furthermore, both data sources emphasize the need for a more practical and industry-relevant curriculum to better align academic learning with professional demands. Graduates expressed a desire for more hands-on experiences, such as internships, workshops, and industry collaborations, which would better equip them to face the challenges of the job market. This aligns with the work of Sachitra & Kumara (2019), who stress the importance of collaboration with industry stakeholders to design curricula that meet the evolving needs of the job market.

The external degree offers a solid foundation for career advancement in certain fields, addressing the gap between academic knowledge and practical industry skills, enhancing networking opportunities, and expanding career support services will be essential to further improve the employability and professional success of graduates in the competitive job market.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study investigated the impact of external degree programs in Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura on the professional growth and employability of its graduates. Through a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews, the research provided a detailed understanding of graduates' career trajectories, experiences, and perceptions over time.

The quantitative results revealed that 70% of graduates experienced career advancement within three years of completing their degree, with 60% reporting income increases. These findings suggest that the external degree plays a significant role in opening doors to career opportunities, particularly in fields such as education, social services, and NGOs, where the academic foundation aligns well with job demands. However, the data also highlighted challenges faced by graduates in the corporate sector, where a gap between academic training and the technical skills required by the industry was a consistent barrier to further professional advancement.

Qualitative insights shed light on the graduates' lived experiences, revealing that while the degree provided academic credibility and instilled confidence, many graduates felt underprepared for the practical demands of

the job market. The lack of industry-specific skills, limited access to networking opportunities, and a perceived gap in career services were key factors limiting career progression. Graduates who participated in internships or volunteer work during their studies reported more positive outcomes, indicating that increased practical training and hands-on industry exposure could significantly improve future job prospects.

The importance of networking emerged as a central theme, with graduates who actively engaged with alumni networks or professional contacts reporting better career advancement. However, the lack of dedicated spaces for networking and informal peer interaction within the external degree programs was seen as a notable limitation. This points to an opportunity for the University to create more collaborative environments and facilitate networking among external degree students, helping them build valuable professional relationships.

In light of these findings, it is evident that while the external degree provides a solid academic foundation, there is a pressing need to better align the curriculum with the evolving needs of the labour market. Enhancing the curriculum with practical skills training, expanding career services, and increasing opportunities for networking and industry collaboration should be prioritized. By addressing these areas, the University can better equip graduates with the tools needed to thrive in an increasingly competitive job market.

Ultimately, this study highlights the need for an integrated educational approach that not only focuses on academic knowledge but also includes practical experience, personalized career support, and strong ties with industry stakeholders. By strengthening these components of the external degree programs, the University of Sri Jayewardenepura can significantly improve the employability and long-term career success of its graduates, ensuring they are well-prepared to meet the demands of the global workforce.

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