RESEARCH ARTICLE

LACK OF COORDINATION AND COOPERATION AND UNIVERSITY INDUSTRY LINKS; THEORY OF COMMUNICATIVE ACTION

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Universities around the world are shifting from the original purpose to the production of employable graduates in the current era. Therefore, producing employable graduates has become one of the primary functions of Universities. Problems regarding unemployed and underemployed graduates in Asia are continued from the last three decades. The lack of coordination and cooperation among various stakeholders is the main reason for the plight of the unemployed graduates. The objectives of this study is to analyse issues related to coordination and cooperation of stakeholders in the university system in respect of employability issues; and to evaluate the roles of power in relation to the coordination and cooperation of stakeholders in the university system with respect to employability issues; Attention is paid to exploring the reasons for the issue via the lens of the theory of communicative action. This empirical study was undertaken as a qualitative embedded single case study strategy to investigate this phenomenon, and adopted in the critical constructive nature of research philosophy. Accordingly, based on the empirical evidence of the study, it is concluded that the bureaucratic system practiced in management faculties overrun the lifeworld of academics and other stakeholders. Instrumental action in the decision making process and asymmetrical power relations among stakeholders prevent free speech space in the university set up, which has resulted in a lack of coordination and cooperation among stakeholders. The unique findings of the study add to the TCA on how a university accomplishes its goal in the absence of a mutual understanding or free speech situation among stakeholders.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education has been recognized as a major component that contributes to society by improving the quality of human life (Tang *et al*., 2010). Knowledge production, institutional autonomy and academic freedom are vital features in the conventional universities, not only in Sri Lanka but also in the rest of the world (Rasmussen, 2007). The main purpose of the universities is to generate knowledge where research is the backbone of academics. Different academic fields of knowledge are developed through combined research work with industries and community (university-industry/business linkages) around the globe (Readings, 1999; Rasmussen, 2007). However, universities around the world have already shifted or are shifting from this original purpose to the production of employable graduates in the current era. Therefore, producing employable graduates has become one of the primary functions of Universities (Feller, 1997; Hommadi, 1990; World Bank, 2012, Fremont, 1965, Datar and Srikant, 2011).Consequently; universities have moved from pure knowledge centres to market centresi.e. producing employable graduates. With the rise of neoliberalism, the employability of graduates has become a more important goal of universities than ever before (Feller, 1997).

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Thus, the inability of universities to produce employable graduates is considered a critical issue (De Silva, 2014). This paradigm shift can be seen not only in all established universities in the developed world like Cambridge and Harvard, but also in Universities in developing countries like Sri Lanka and India (Datar and Srikant 2011). However, many have questioned the role played by Sri Lankan public Universities in increasing employable graduates (UGC, 1996, 2006; The Commonwealth of Learning and ADB, 1999; QAH for Sri Lankan Universities, 2002; Ministry of Tertiary Education and training, 2003; IRQUE, 2005; Siyambalapitiya, 2005; QAAC, 2007; Tharmaseelan, 2007; HETC, 2010; Wijesundera, 2011; Nawaratne, 2012;Sharmila, 2013).The average overall employability ratio of Universities in Sri Lanka is 54% (Nawaratne, 2012). The Faculties of Arts and Management have higher rates of unemployment in the country and accounted for 76% and 36% of unemployed graduates respectively, whereas Medicine and Engineering accounted for 10% and 7% respectively in 2012. This study has sought to answer the research question as to why the Management Faculties of Sri Lankan State universities continue to produce graduates who find it hard to obtain jobs in the employment market. Problems regarding unemployed and underemployed graduates in Sri Lanka are not a new phenomenon, which has been reported since the academic year 1959/60. According to Wickramasinghe (2010), graduate

unemployment or underemployment is due to a mismatch between the aspirations of graduates and the employment opportunities available to them. Further, previous studies have indicated that a mismatch between supply and demand conditions for graduate employment is due to the supply driven education system, which produces graduates who are not suited to labour market conditions. (Ranasinghe, 1992; Davies, 2000; Finn, 2000; Lindsay, 2002; Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2003;Weligamage and Siengthai, 2003;National Science Foundation of Sri Lanka,2004;Ariyawansa,2008; Wickramarachchi,2008).

Methodology of the study

For this study a qualitative approach has been used. This approach works best for understanding social phenomena. This study deals with various stakeholders. Researcher, therefore, understood that interviews and focus group discussion are the best ways to collect appropriate information for this study. During the period from February to July 2015, data was collected through interviews and focus group discussion throughout Sri Lanka. This approach enabled a discourse analysis methodological approach to interviewees of 29 representatives from different sectors including academics, Industrialists, government and three focus groups discussion.

Preliminary study and Findings of the Research

In order to place the above issue in its current context in Sri Lanka, particularly because of the paucity of literature on the theme, a preliminary study was undertaken to explore why management graduates are unemployed. The findings of this of study revealed that the immediate causes for unemployable graduates are outdated curricula, poor service quality of academics and lack of industrial linkages, factors that were revealed in the previous round of interviews as well. However, the new insight gained in the consequent interviews was the lack of coordination and cooperation among stakeholders. The views of both academics and employers reveal that universities ought to have strong coordination and cooperation with other stakeholders, including the private sector. This is further evidenced by the report of the World Economy Forum (2012/13), which states that the Sri Lankan University andIndustry collaboration in Research and Development is ranked 40 out of 139 Countries. These discourses clearly show that a lack of coordination and cooperation among the stakeholders is the backdrop to contemporary issues pertaining to graduate unemployment. Therefore, the research problem of the study is reformulated as "Why do universitiess fail to build coordination and cooperation among their stakeholders resulting in low employability among their graduates?"

Research problem

In order to place the above issue in its current context in Sri Lanka, particularly because of the paucity of literature on the theme, a preliminary study was undertaken to explore why management graduates are unemployed. The findings of this of study revealed that the immediate causes for unemployable graduates are outdated curricula, poor service quality of academics and lack of industrial linkages, factors that were revealed in the previous round of interviews as well. However, the new insight gained in the consequent interviews was the lack of coordination and cooperation among stakeholders. The

views of both academics and industrialists reveal that universities ought to have strong coordination and cooperation with Industries,especially with the private sector. This is further evidenced by the report of the World Economy Forum (2012/13), which states that the Sri Lankan University andIndustry collaboration in Research and Development is ranked 40 out of 139 Countries. These discourses clearly show that a lack of coordination and cooperationwith industries is the backdrop to contemporary issues pertaining to graduate unemployment. Therefore, the research problem of the study is "Why do universities fail to build coordination and cooperation with industries?"

Application of Theory of Communicative action

Habermas (1984) developed the Theory of Communicative Action (TCA) and its foundation lies on twin theories of resource of action theory and systems theory (Flynn, 2007). The main assumption of TCA is that people prefer to communicate with each other if they have equal opportunities to communicate and reach their goals through agreed mutual understanding, which Habermas calls an 'ideal speech situation'. However, the theory further states that present society is bound up in bureaucracy, and because of the mediations by the bureaucracy,society has lost theideal speech situation and, therefore, society cannot reach goals through mutual understanding. Instead, society uses power and money as steering mechanisms to reach coordination and cooperation towards achieving its goals.

Findings of Study

The coordination and cooperation are studied with the sub-themes derived from the TCA - forum for dialogue, level of trust between the main stakeholders, commitment towards achieving the common goals, and finally, recognition of mutual expectations of the parties. Put it differently, forum for dialogue, level of trust between the main stakeholders, commitment towards achieving the common goals, and finally, recognition of mutual expectations of the parties are taken as indicators ofcoordination and cooperationwith industries. The analysis shows that there is a lack of coordination and cooperation between the academics and the other stakeholders. Further, it shows, as it is theorised in the TCA, the pattern of implementing bureaucratic systems in universities has negatively influenced coordination and cooperation among the stakeholders due to a lack of mutual understanding. Furthermore, coordination and cooperation has become worse because of asymmetrical power. Accordingly, findings revealed that neither the bureaucratic system nor mutual understanding provides a conducive platform to realise coordination and cooperation in this particular Management Faculty, thus it has failed to reach the goal of graduate employability. Power is a medium and mechanism in the bureaucratic system which assumes control of all activities of individuals of the universities. The bureaucratic system along with dominant academic administrators/academics who gain power through hierarchical organization, hierarchical society and or personal achievement, does not permit people to engage in open dialogue, paving the way for people to lose their mutual trust which leads to less commitment towards achieving the common goals. The study provides sufficient evidence to accept the four propositions advanced in the present study. Lack of forum for dialogue, lack of trust

between the stakeholders, commitment towards achieving the common goals and finally non-awareness of mutual expectations of each other, are emphasized, showing lack of coordination and cooperation that exists among the stakeholders, particularly between academics and other stakeholders of the university. Reasons for the lack of coordination and cooperation being the lifeworld of academics is overrun by the system, as well as lifeworld itself, asymmetrical power relations among the stakeholders and the instrumental action and strategic action followed by the academic administrators, rather than communicative action in the decision making process, from the perspectives of the research participants. This evidence can be taken as additional support for the advancement of the theorem in the present study.

This study has found further that the academics do not work independently, they lose their academic values, and they perceive an absence of ownership and autonomy. Absence of this ownership and autonomy leads to less commitment and less engagement with academic programmes and the activities of the university. Therefore, the bureaucratic system controls freedom of the academic, ultimately influencing the lives and values of academics which contribute to graduate unemployability. The government imposes rules and regulations on the day to day activities of the academics, which are far away from the concepts in the Hombolt model of the university. The basic principle of the university is academic freedom and institutional autonomy, which support to produce knowledge through teaching and research to contribute to society. Violatingthe basic principle, academic freedom and institutional autonomy are taken away from the university set up in Sri Lankan state universities.

Accordingly, based on the empirical evidence of the present study, it is concluded that the bureaucratic system practiced in management faculties overrun the lifeworld of academics and other stakeholders. Instrumental rationality in the decision making process and asymmetrical power relations among stakeholders prevent free speech situation in the university set up, which has resulted in a lack of coordination and cooperation among stakeholders. These practices have collectively created asymmetrical power relationships between academic administrators and even some academics. This asymmetrical power among the academic administrators and academics destroy the communicative action in the university system, mainly through politics with instrumental and strategic actions. The academic administrators use their power to control the process and implement his or her own desires in the universities. Each faculty and department functions under one leader's opinions, and once he or she leaves the position or the office, the entire system of the university collapses. Therefore, the role of academic leaders and deployment of power, play a vital role in the University System in Sri Lanka. According to the discourse of the study, three major root causes for the lack of coordination and cooperation are explored. Firstly, the overrunning of the lifeworld of academics by the bureaucratic system, secondly, instrumental/strategic action of academic and administrative leaders, thirdly, asymmetric power relations among academics and academic leaders, have in combination influenced academics and have destroyed the space for communication or the ideal speech situation. In addition, Sri Lankan hierarchical and diffident culture, further impact on the ideal speech situation which prevents itself in the lifeworld of

academics. These scenarios affect mutual understanding among the stakeholders, which lead to lack of coordination and cooperation among the stakeholders. It creates a gap, particularly between major stakeholders of academic and industry, which results in low graduate employability among the management graduates. Therefore, coordination and cooperation among the stakeholders directly influence graduates' employment, which is a new contribution in the present study. Therefore, it is theorized that the common goal (employability of graduates) is not fully achieved due to a lack of coordination and cooperation, which is caused by the absence of free speech and loss of mutual understanding among the key university stakeholders. On the basis of the TCA and data gathered, a new theory is derived and added to the existing body of knowledge as the "Theory of graduate employability" which is advanced as **"**strong coordination and cooperation among the stakeholders of a university through anideal speech situation that is likely to ensure the employability of its graduates".

The study provides evidence that 'a free speech situation' is not possible among stakeholders, because of the hierarchical relationships among them. A free speech situation is a situation where all stakeholders have the freedom to express their own views without any outside pressure or intervention. Therefore the theory of communicative action cannot be applied without modification to the actual situation in Sri Lanka. A theoretical and practical way out for coordination and cooperation in a context where a ' free speech situation' is not always available. The theory argues that in the absence of conditions for free communicative exchange among stakeholders, coordination and cooperation is likely to remain weak and ineffective, reproducing the problem of graduate unemployment. In the case cited, the bureaucratic system in the university overruns the lifeworld of academics through hierarchical (asymmetric) power used as a steering medium and mechanism. The bureaucratic system influences and prevents the ideal speech situation directly and indirectly, through controlling of the lifeworld of academics. Asymmetric powers between academic administrators and academics also control the ideal speech situation through micro- politics, which is controlled by the levels of power among academic leaders and academics. Academic leaders (practicing instrumental rationality) in the decision making process in the university system in Sri Lankan State university, reduces the space for an ideal speech situation in the universities.

This situation, i.eabsence of space for ideal speech, directly influences the level of mutual understanding and agreement among the stakeholders and leads to a lack of coordination and cooperation among the stakeholders of the Management Faculty under study, resulting in the production of unskilled and incompetent graduates, whose abilities do not match with the requirements of the labour market and contributes to unemployment among management graduates in State universities in Sri Lanka. According to the research findings, the free speech situation does not assist strong coordination and cooperation among stakeholders due to cultural and systematic barriers in the university set up in Sri Lankan universities. The academics realise their own roles in the process of producing employable graduates in instances where academic administrators work freely without any personal agenda. If academic administrators work altruistically and implement good governance, the goals of university will be

achieved. This would be a 'transformative practice,' that can address the problems of this thesis. This transformative practice will help to develop a similar situation to free speech which is highlighted by Habermas (1984) in the TCA. The next research will be carried out in Sri Lankan or other countries in different sectors, by applying Communicative Action Theory to explore how mutual understanding prevails. In addition, it will be examined with Herbamas's argument whether it is matched or contradicted. Further, the present study opens a path to investigate cultural aspects of the individual and society and how it impacts on the levels of coordination and cooperation among the stakeholders. This level of cooperation and coordination of individuals is again influenced by their attitude which is another area to be investigated.

Conclusion

Coordination and cooperation has become worse because of asymmetrical power. Accordingly, findings revealed that neither the bureaucratic system nor mutual understanding provides a conducive platform to realise coordination and cooperation in this particular Management Faculty, thus it has failed to reach the goal of graduate employability. Power is a medium and mechanism in the bureaucratic system which assumes control of all activities of individuals of the universities. The bureaucratic system along with dominant academic administrators/academics who gain power through hierarchical organization, hierarchical society and or personal achievement, does not permit people to engage in open dialogue, paving the way for people to lose their mutual trust which leads to less commitment towards achieving the common goals.

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