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### A Study on the Career Aspirations of Undergraduates in Sri Lanka

A.W.G. Madurangi<sup>a</sup>, Jayaranjani Sutha<sup>b,\*</sup> and P. Wachissara<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Faculty of Management, Uva Wellassa University of Sri Lanka

<sup>b</sup> Department of Management, Faculty of Commerce and Management,  
Eastern University, Sri Lanka

#### ABSTRACT

Study of career aspirations among undergraduates has become an important topic since undergraduates have been facing numerous challenges after completing their university degree. This study examined the determinants of career aspirations among undergraduates and the key challenges faced by them in choosing one. This study employed the mono method approach in the mixed method and so qualitative data were collected from 20 undergraduates from 04 universities and from 03 graduates who had passed out to conduct case studies based on their success stories; the findings from the semi-structured interviews were then analyzed and validated through thematic analysis. This study found that subjective norms, behaviour, and individual attitude were the factors that determined the career aspirations of undergraduates in Sri Lanka. Thus, the key issues that influenced the career aspirations of undergraduates were identified. This research provides significant insights into this matter for policymakers and decision makers working on reforms to the university education system of the Island so that the universities can contribute more meaningfully towards the career development of undergraduates.

**Keywords:** Attitudes, Career aspiration, Perceived behavioural control, Social norms, Theory of planned behaviour.

\*Corresponding Author: [jasulama@gmail.com](mailto:jasulama@gmail.com)

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## **1. Introduction**

Education is a major determinant of the prosperity, quality of life and development of a country. The main objective of higher education is to train students to take up different careers (Ariyawansa, 2008). So the main purpose of Sri Lankan university education has been “to provide higher education to expand the knowledge and intelligence” of students (State Council of Sri Lanka, 1942). According to the Sri Lanka University Act No. 16 of 1978, “Universities are established for the purpose of providing and promoting higher education.” Universities are the institutions that provide higher education, which they do by imparting both academic knowledge and professional training. This is what equips graduates with the attributes needed to take up employment. According to Hommadi (1990), universities have duties such as conducting pure and applied research, protecting knowledge, exchanging knowledge, protecting the culture, solving social problems, performing public service, assisting modernization, training students to take up positions in the academic and professional sectors, improving students’ thinking skills, physical strength, and ability to control their emotions. Further, they have to provide students’ requirements such as food, accommodation, medical facilities, counselling, and guidance on job opportunities. Therefore, universities play a major role in assisting the development of career insight and career aspiration of undergraduates.

Based on a preliminary study conducted by researchers on a sample group of 50 graduates from Sri Lankan universities, it was found that about 53 percent of the graduates were currently engaged in careers that were not related to the degree programme they pursued in the university, while the remaining 47 percent of graduates were engaged in careers related to their degree programme. Therefore, this finding highlighted the fact that most of the graduates, though they had career aspirations, were not able to achieve them. Graduates who had passed out long ago highlighted this problem when they discussed this matter. According to Ariyawansa (2008), there is a considerable demand for graduates in Sri Lanka since they comprise the most important human capital of the country and as such are expected to fill the middle and top management positions in business and industry. However, some talented graduates have to wait for a long time to secure employment, especially if it is in the government sector (Wickramarachchi, 2008). In most cases a degree certificate by itself is not enough to ensure suitable employment due to the lack of self-confidence and other important skills (De Silva, 1977).

Apart from that, as pointed out by Hettige, Mayer, and Salih (2004) and Ibarguen (2005), Sri Lankan graduates had consistently shown a clear preference for government sector employment, compared to the private sector or self-employment (Youth surveys, 2004). This finding has been confirmed by qualitative studies (Reinprecht & Weeratunge, 2006). As Ariyawansa emphasized, this has been the major cause for the high level of unemployment of graduates in Sri Lanka, during the past few decades. Sri Lankan university education has been criticized by many for not being job oriented, although the main issue is that students and their parents expect better employment opportunities for graduates as soon as they pass out from the universities. The public perception in the country is that the state universities are not producing graduates according to the requirements of the job market.

Thousands of undergraduates are passing out annually from universities and seeking employment opportunities. Most of them are willing to start their careers with paid jobs, whereas the rest may want to be self-employed. However, it is a fact that the paid jobs are becoming increasingly scarce, both in the government and non-government sectors. This situation creates strong competition among graduates to find jobs and start their careers early but it eventually leads to frustration and unrest among graduates (Ariyawansa, 2008). Therefore, due to the limited employment opportunities available, Sri Lankan graduates are facing challenges in achieving their career aspirations. Though there are many references in the literature to career aspirations, only a limited number of researches have been done regarding the career aspirations of undergraduates. While those studies have highlighted some factors (Francis, 2002; Keong, 2008) that influence the career aspirations of undergraduates, there is a need for further research in this area.

According to the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen 1975), behaviour is explained by the intention. The intention is determined by the attitude towards the recommended behaviour, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control. A few studies have discussed the utility of the TPB in the career domain (Arnold et al., 2006; Hooft & Jong, 2009). However, Arnold et al. (2006) emphasized that more effort should be made to examine and extend TPB in the context of career choice and development. Because career aspiration is only one component of career development (Ismail et al., 2008), the researcher developed and tested a model incorporating demographic factors (such as age, gender, education level, work experience, family background) and personal factors (attitude towards the recommended behaviour, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control) also to test it fully. Therefore, by drawing from the gap, the current research raises three questions:

- What is the most appropriate definition for the career aspiration concept in the context of current Sri Lankan undergraduates?
- What are the factors that affect the different career aspirations of undergraduates?
- What are the key issues facing undergraduates with regard to their career aspirations?

Therefore, this paper aims to develop the definition of career aspiration concept and to explore the factors relating to career aspiration of undergraduate students in Sri Lankan Universities.

## **2. Literature Review**

Career aspiration is defined as an individual's desire for future employment (Powell & Butterfield, 2002) that can be achieved if he/ she works directly towards it (Ismail et al., 2008). Career aspiration is a good measurement of the success of a career, (Ismail et al., 2008) that will emerge through the influence of social context including values, norms and beliefs (Ismail et al., 2008). Further, Bourdieu (1994) defines Career aspiration as a cluster of needs, motives and behavioural intentions that individuals articulate with respect to different career fields, based on Bourdieu's theory of social fields. Apart from that, Gutek and Larwood (1987) defined a career as "a series of related jobs within an organization or different jobs within

various companies" (p. 9). Simply put, Career aspiration represents an individual's orientation toward a desired career goal under ideal conditions. It could also be stated that career aspirations "provide information about an individual's interests and hopes, unfettered by reality" (Hellenga, Aber, & Rhodes, 2002, p. 200; Rojewski, 1996).

Career aspiration is determined by many factors, such as parental and family factors (Lerdpornkulrat *et al.*, 2009; Shumba, 2012; Gemici *et al.*, 2014). Especially, the socio-economic status of a family has a positive relationship with career aspiration (Prasetyo, 2005). Other than that, parent's education and occupation become factors that determine children's career aspirations, especially that of girls (Pfingst, 2015; Radhika, 2016; Rainey, 1997). Research on girls' career aspirations has found that mother-daughter relationship was a significant factor (Rainey, 1997). Further, Mudhovozi and Chireshe (2012) have found that the rural public school students delayed their career decisions and that the parents, teachers and friends were influencing their career choices. Sellers *et al.* (1999) have argued that career aspiration has a positive relationship with parents' socio-economic status. People of a high socio-economic status are more likely to be knowledgeable and so choose a professional occupation for their offspring. Females who come from low-income families appear to depend more on the experience of their relatives and friends (Brown & Barbosa, 2001). Influence of siblings is high in families of low socio-economic status (Ali *et al.*, 2005). Well-educated parents have high career expectations for their children as do parents who are permanently employed. Generally, it can be said that students who come from high status families have high career aspirations and students who come from lower status families have low career aspirations (Patton & Creed, 2007).

Another thing that affects one's career aspiration is gender (Rainey, 1997; Migunde *et al.*, 2011). According to Domenico (2006), women's participation in the workforce increased after the Second World War. Lately, Girls' career aspirations have increased more than ever before (Francis, 2002). Females have a more positive attitude towards work than males (Francis, 2002). Women with high career aspirations appear to be satisfied with their lives, and feel confident about their future career plans (Parsons *et al.*, 1978). It has been argued that men and women take different career paths because their paths are influenced by societal roles, relationships and responsibilities. Several studies have revealed that daughters' of working mothers have a broader conception of the role of females than the daughters of non-working mothers. Females whose mothers are working have more confidence about their career and have a high level of career aspirations (Parsons *et al.*, 1978; Mishkin *et al.*, 2016). Earlier researchers have found that peer influence, especially that of male peers, strongly affect female career aspiration (Barnett & Baruch, 1971). If male peers show a negative attitude towards the careers of females, their career aspirations become lower (Parsons *et al.*, 1978). According to Patton and Creed (2007), female students' aspirations tend to change through the course of their academic years in school, but male students' did not change their career aspirations much during their academic years at school. Also, Patton and Creed (2007) found that males were more inclined towards professional types of occupations than female students.

In addition to that, individualistic cultures are characterized as emphasizing the importance of individuals maintaining their independence and differentiating themselves from other people, whereas collectivist

cultures are characterized as emphasizing the importance of the interdependence between people and the way in which individual identity is defined by one's relationship to others (Erez and Earley, 1993; Fiske *et al.*, 1998; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1995). In this aspect, Sri Lankan culture has been indexed as a collectivist culture (Hofstede, 1980).

Individuals in collectivist cultures are more predisposed towards a communitarian outlook and to view individual performance as less important than group performance (Chen, 1995). During childhood, people learn to subordinate their desires to the needs of their family, a sensitivity that extends to cover other groups later in life (Roland, 1984). Although the predominant cultural value of some developing countries was collectivism, of late, students have demonstrated individualist tendencies in some contexts (Tanuja Agarwala, 2008). It was also observed that adolescents experience a range of concerns that relate to their post-high-school transition and future career (Code & Bernes, 2006).

The strongest motivating factors in job selection were having power and authority, peaceful work environment, opportunity for career advancement and good pay, whereas the least motivating factors were close supervision and guidance, praise from supervisor, feedback on performance and a sense of belonging (Aycaan & Fikret-Pasa, 2003). It was observed among management students in India that the "father" was the most significant individual influencing the career choice of Indian management students (Tanuja Agarwala, 2008). Career planning is an important activity of high school students and they are likely to approach their parents first for help with career planning (Witko *et al.*, 2005).

### 3. Methodology

This paper followed the mono method by using only qualitative data, and the information, which is mainly in textual form, is analyzed by employing qualitative data analysis techniques.

#### **Participants**

There are currently 15 National universities in Sri Lanka, which are under the authority of the University Grants Commission (UGC). Accordingly, to reduce any biasness in this study, 20 undergraduates were selected from 04 universities, namely, Uva Wellassa University, Sabaragamuwa University, Wayamba University and Ruhuna University. In order to enhance the diversity of the population chosen for the sample, 5 undergraduates representing 5 different faculties from each of the 04 universities were selected. Apart from that, 3 employed graduates were selected in order to validate the qualitative information gathered from interviews. Of the undergraduates selected from these universities seven were majoring in Science subjects – Chemistry (a), Fisheries (b), Agriculture (c), Art (d), Management (e), Geomatics (f), and Applied Science (g). Among the selected undergraduates there were both males (M) and females (F). 50% of the undergraduates were female and 50% were male. Selected undergraduates belonged to four age categories as follows:

23 years – 10%	24 years – 15%
25 years – 60%	26 years – 15%

### **Data collection**

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect information from the selected 20 undergraduates and 3 graduates from the field. The Structured questions (Interview guidelines) were prepared ahead of time. This allowed interviewer to be fully prepared and feel confident during the interviews. In-depth interviews with respondents allowed interviewer to delve deeply into the career aspirations of undergraduates in Sri Lanka within an average time of 30-45 minutes per respondent.

### **Data Analysis and data validation**

The objective of this study was to identify the career aspirations of undergraduates. This was done using thematic analysis techniques, which identified specific patterns of qualitative data that were organized using NVivo 8.

Apart from that, as per Ismail, students' career aspirations are being moulded under a social context of norms, values and beliefs. Therefore, it can be concluded that the social factors are a must in determining one's own career aspirations. As it is also a good indication of the success of a career, there is a direct correlation between the "accepted" success of a career and the background society. Therefore, to conduct the case studies, the researcher selected some "recognized successful career holders," namely Dr. GHI (Senior Lecturer – Ruhuna University), Dr. XYZ (Senior Lecturer – Uva Wellassa University), and Mr. ABC (CEO, Leo Engineering Private Limited). The selected personalities here were strictly chosen based on their successful career achievements and as per the social recognition extended to them.

It is seen that the selected Career holders have successfully achieved their career aspirations and the researcher has affirmed this via the interviews too. The group of people chosen for the case studies had also been undergraduates once and they possessed the same career aspirations that are common to all Sri Lankan Undergraduates. Therefore, studying their career paths may help in analyzing how the social and other factors have influenced them in orienting their career aspirations. This helps in validating the results that were obtained from the research, especially with reference to the Sri Lankan social background.

## **4. Results and Discussion**

### **Objective 1: To define the concept of career aspiration in the study context**

Referring to the selected sample it can be considered as a typical cross section of undergraduates in Sri Lanka. According to the first objective of this paper, the concept called career aspirations of undergraduates in Sri Lanka was elaborated using 03 themes, namely career goal, career vision and career benefit. When considering the career goals themes, they were found to be field related, non-field related and with no

specific goals as sub-themes. Accordingly, the career goals of many Sri Lankan undergraduates are being determined in relation to their field of study. Both male and female undergraduates have the desire to work in those same areas in which they have their special interest. Especially, Sri Lankan undergraduates prefer to remain in a professional field that is relevant to their study area, in order to get the maximum benefits out of their knowledge. They have a desire to utilize their knowledge in the real world of work. Moreover, Sri Lankan undergraduates who may not have any special field related career desires may have the potential to fill up other gaps in the world of work, such as careers that do not have any specialized career oriented study path.

*“My goal is to be a successful lecturer/ researcher and a professional member of the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), which is a non-governmental organization; it has done a lot of useful work to tackle the current environmental issues in the world”*

Respondent 03, Representing 1, (c), (F) Personal Interview, 2017

The identified second theme, career vision of the Sri Lankan undergraduates, has been affected due to various factors. The person's weaknesses and strengths, the sector of work (whether it is private or government), the knowledge related to the field that has to be searched from various sources are some of them. Further, the third theme refers to the benefits that almost all the Sri Lankan undergraduates are seeking in their career. Career aspiration of an undergraduate may be based on the financial benefits, incentives, self-respect, promotions, satisfaction and future benefits that he can gain from the particular career.

*“Actually at the moment I have not specified my career goal or objective. I suppose it is to achieve a higher position that promises a good salary and other benefits”*

Respondent 18, Representing 2, (g) Personal Interview, 2017

*“Being a businessman with a spirit of independence I prefer to work in the private sector in my own organization. This is much better than working somewhere in a government office. I like to be a leader, so I prefer this autonomy and freedom to do things my own way”*

Respondent 13, Representing 4, (e), (M) Personal Interview, 2017

Finally, after considering all the information gathered through interviews from undergraduates, it seems safe to define the career aspiration concept as,

*“Career aspiration is the identification of an appropriate professional path during the period of undergraduate studies with realistic vision by considering future career targets, goals and objectives through which the final state of satisfaction could be achieved”*

### **Objective 2: To identify the factors that affect different career aspirations of undergraduates**

Second objective of the study is to identify the factors that affect different career aspirations of undergraduates; this can be illustrated using the three (03) themes that can elaborate the career aspirations of an undergraduate. This objective is achieved by considering the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen,

1975), as it assumes that behaviour is explained by the intention, and that the intention is determined by the attitude towards recommended behaviour, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control. Therefore, attitude, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control are considered as the three main themes or determinants of career aspirations.

When considering the first theme, Subjective norms, it is defined as the perceived social pressure to engage or not to engage in the behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). In other words, it is one's belief about how people he/ she cares about would view the behaviour in question. According to the findings of this study, the family, peers and subject area have become huge factors that influence the career aspirations of undergraduates in Sri Lanka. For example, a family always imagines a common vision or future for itself. Hence, even when a student dreams of a particular goal, he/ she will have to consider whether the family would approve of it. The following statement shows how the family can influence the career path of an undergraduate. This influence may have either a positive or negative effect on a person.

*"In my childhood my favorite subject was mathematics. So I was expecting to follow some career in that field. Therefore, after my O/Ls, my only choice for A/Ls was mathematics. By the way, I'm having an elder sister and she failed twice in mathematics while doing her A/Ls. Due to this my parents advised me strongly not to choose Math or Biology for A/Ls and go for Commerce or Arts without taking a risk. So I went along with their suggestion and did Commerce for the A/Ls and later I was selected for the university. Due to this I had to change my career to the commerce side. Thus, my family background highly affected my career direction."*

Respondent 05, Representing 1, (e), (M) Personal Interview

This study also found that the parents' education and occupation became factors that determined children's career aspirations, especially in the case of girls. Results indicated that the well-educated parents' children have high career expectations and this was also true in the case of parents who were permanently employed. At the same time, peers were identified as both competitors and motivators who influenced the career aspirations of undergraduates.

*"[...] Peers influenced me by competing for the same posts. They motivated me by providing strong competition at the time we were all looking for jobs."*

Respondent 06, Representing 3, (e), (F) Personal Interview, 2017

Discussing the state of the undergraduates' and graduates' aspirations, it appeared that most of the selected undergraduates did not achieve their undergraduate career aspirations. The factors discussed earlier had acted as major influences to bring about this condition. When considering the factors that influence career aspiration, family and peers stand out as the two most effective factors according to the selected undergraduates. As an example, many of the graduate case studies validated the findings from the initial qualitative information gathered through semi-structured interviews.

**Case 01 - Dr. XYZ**

**Senior Lecturer (Gr II)**, BSc (Sabaragamuwa), MSc (Peradeniya), PhD (Korea)

Dr. XYZ is currently working as a Senior Lecturer at Uva Wellassa University. He had graduated earlier from Sabaragamuwa University, Sri Lanka with a degree in food science. The President's Award for Scientific Publication of the year 2014 was presented to him in that year. Dr. XYZ's career goal had been to become a lecturer and also a good academic writer when he was studying at the university. Already he has achieved many of his career goals and now his desire is to become a professor and publish more scientific papers. Dr. XYZ started his career from the entry level as a demonstrator. Now he is holding one of the top positions in academia. Every stage of his career presented him with great opportunities like interesting assignments and heavy responsibilities. His belief is that a proper career should offer variations, challenges and upward mobility to avoid monotony. Fortunately, he found appropriate career guidance from his university lecturers during his undergraduate period. He feels that it is good to have role models in our lives because they will help us to find the best career guidance path while at university. Family factors also influenced his career choice because he had to meet certain requirements of his family and fulfill some responsibilities towards it. Peers also influenced his career choice to some extent as he learnt from their experiences too. According to him, *"In most of the cases our undergraduate career aspirations were influenced by our families, but it does not mean that our dreams had to be totally wiped out. Gradually we were able to clear our path and arrange adequate solutions to deal with family matters; despite those burdens we were able to realize our dreams."*

Also, the social norm measure is a function of the perceived normative beliefs of significant others, such as family, friends, and co-workers, weighted by the individual's motive to comply with each normative belief (Elfvig *et al.*, 2009). Previous studies found that career aspiration of students is mostly influenced by parental and family factors (Lerdpornkulrat, *et al.*, 2009; Shumba, 2012; Gemici, *et al.*, 2014). According to Koech *et al.* (2016), family factors, peer influence, role model influence and career benefit influence can affect an undergraduate's career choice. Further, when considering peer influences, especially that of male peers, they can have a bad effect on the career aspirations of females (Barnett & Baruch, 1971). If male peers have negative attitudes toward the career of females that can lower the females' career aspirations (Parsons *et al.*, 1978). Apart from that, Mudhovozi and Chireshe (2012) have found that the rural public school students tended to delay their career decisions and that same study revealed that parents, teachers and friends were influencing their career choices.

When considering the second theme, perceived behavioural control, it is defined as peoples' perception of the ease or difficulty of engaging in the behaviour of interest (Ajzen, 1991). This study found that in most of the situations confidence about career aspirations made it possible to achieve the target. According to above statement, when the undergraduate is highly confident of her talents and ability to meet the requirements for the particular job, it will be easy for her to be successful in the interview. Desire and confidence towards a specific field can stimulate the career aspiration of undergraduates.

*“I am a confident woman and I like to work in a direct manner. I believe in my qualifications and my communication skills. My understanding is that the right people with all the necessary qualifications are best equipped to enjoy promotions and advancement.”*

Respondent 03, Representing 1, (c), (F) Personal Interview

To be successful in a profession may prove to be really hard sometimes. It is necessary to have maximum qualifications to meet professional requirements such as language competency, communication skills and other qualifications for performing well in the career. As undergraduates' basic degree is not enough to compete with peers, additional training may be required and strategies should be followed in order to move along a successful career path.

Considering real situations, there are many people who are always working hard to acquire more skills and constantly seeking opportunities to realize their career aspirations successfully. Usually, they are full of confidence as the following case study reveals.

#### **Case 02 – Mr. ABC**

Mr. ABC is a 30-year old renowned person who graduated from the Faculty of Science and Technology of Uva Wellassa University. He is the Proprietor of LEO Engineering Services and its CEO. He is also currently working as a Probationary Lecturer in the University of Kelaniya.

Mr. ABC had a career goal of working at NASA when he entered university and whilst studying there. Although he has not been able to realize his expectation his career goal remains firmly as it was without any change. Mr. ABC is moving along his path towards the ultimate goal of his career and he is more than satisfied with what he has achieved so far. He enjoys all three jobs that he does even though he has to sacrifice a lot, as most of the time, his day starts at 4 am and ends around 10 pm.

Over the course of his career he had to face many disruptions and challenges. He started his career as a Product and Process Development Engineer for “Flintec Transducers” even before his graduation as he was offered the job during the training period. He worked there for one year and then changed the job because he got a good position as the Lead Mechanical Engineer at “Fine Finish” Engineering Private Limited. After working there for two years he was promoted to Engineering Manager level and then as the Director – Engineering. After that he started his own company, Leo Engineering Services. Then he started Leo Engineering Private Limited, a company dedicated to automated machine production. While running those two businesses he was offered a Lecturer position at the University of Kelaniya. Now he is gladly working at three jobs. Mr. ABC did not have a career plan during his undergraduate days. All he did was make use of all the opportunities he got with confidence. That is what led him to where he is today. His career has always been a matter of handling opportunities. During his time as an undergraduate, he mostly thought of working in the private sector simply because that would give him more freedom. His abilities would not be limited to a narrow field. This has proved correct because his experience and achievements have helped him to qualify to be a Lecturer at the University of Kelaniya.

Finally, his advice to the undergraduates on their career aspiration is, “Try your best to get your first job. It is the key! Don’t wait till you get your dream job but just go for whatever the job you find. But make sure it is related to your field of study. Most important factor is never to consider the salary you get in your first job! Stay there for at least one year. Then the world is yours. Don’t hesitate to change the job, as it will always end up well.”

Previous studies support this view as they have found that peoples’ behaviour is significantly influenced by their level of confidence in performing a particular task. Self-efficacy beliefs can be influenced by choice of activity, perception regarding an activity, effort expended during performance, thought patterns and emotional reaction (Bandura, 1977). Further, scholars have suggested that perceived behavioural control is based on beliefs regarding the presence or absence of requisite resources and opportunities for performing a given task (Bandura *et al.*, 1980; Swan *et al.*, 2007). The findings of these studies further validate the findings of the current study.

In addition to that, attitude of the student is considered to be an influencing factor on undergraduates’ career aspirations. Attitude influences an undergraduate's choice of action, and responses to challenges, incentives, and rewards. In most situations attitude had a positive relationship with the intention and it had an influence on two other constructs. Respondents have different thoughts about successful career. Benefits such as good salary, incentives, recognition, job satisfaction and comfortable lifestyle have been identified by them as the marks of a successful career. They need to have career aspirations that will facilitate them to achieve these good things. Anyway, everyone does not think alike, so depending on personal values and personal attitudes different undergraduates may have different career aspirations.

*“The moment when people recognize me by my name, when I have enough money to help people as I wish and the moment that I get recognized internationally”*

Respondent 03, Representing 1, (c), (F) Personal Interview, 2017

*“I would like to define career success as a good position, good salary, and the reputation later on”*

Respondent 04, Representing 1, (d), (M) Personal Interview, 2017

*“If I have a good income and if I can live without stress in a happy mode, then I would have achieved success in my career”*

Respondent 07, Representing 3, (f), (M) Personal Interview, 2017

**Case 03 - Dr. GHI****Senior Lecturer, Department of Physics, University of Ruhuna**

Dr. GHI is a passionate learner who is always longing for knowledge. Coming from a leading high school in Kalutara District in Sri Lanka, she has become someone who likes to challenge herself. She has taken Pure Mathematics, Applied Mathematics, Physics and Chemistry for her University Entrance Examination. She has always been a dedicated student, working diligently to always make sure that she is at the top of her class. Dr. GHI believes that her high school experience was a stimulating adventure in which she was always on the hunt for knowledge and ways to improve her intellectual abilities.

Dr. GHI who is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Physics, University of Ruhuna, was one of the talented graduates we found during the interviews. Her attitude towards her career aspiration was the unending desire to come out at the top every time.

Therefore, attitude is an important component of the career aspiration. In 2007, she started working on her postgraduate degree and was fortunate enough to conduct her research at the world's largest particle physics laboratory administered by the "European Organization for Nuclear Research" (a.k.a. CERN) in Geneva, Switzerland. Within 6 years she was able to achieve interesting results with her data analysis of the Compact Muon Solenoid experiment. CERN had then accepted her findings on the CMS experiment. That moment was a turning point in her life. Then her title was changed to Dr. GHI.

She is thankful to all her colleagues at the University of Ruhuna and CERN and also her family members for their generous support and encouragement. On numerous occasions they had all been ready to listen and also help her in difficult moments. She cherished the memory of all the teamwork performed together with other international researchers. She expressed her deep gratitude to her Supervisors who had given her the opportunity to conduct research at the most exciting place in the world and according to her desire.

Dr. GHI could continue her research further if she wished in addition to performing her academic work at the University of Ruhuna. She was able to receive many awards.

1. Vice Chancellor's Award – The Most Outstanding Young Researcher in 2015.
2. President's Award for Scientific Publication in 2014.
3. President's Award for Scientific Publication in 2013.

Dr. GHI is also a co-author of all publications under the CMS collaboration since 2010.

The findings of this study are empirically validated through past literature; for example, Evers and Sieverding (2015) suggested that the academic career intention of PhD holders at a German university was a significant predictor of their attitude towards their academic career. In many cases women had a lower positive attitude towards professorship and it was influenced by significant others such as parents, siblings, and peers, etc. Further, scholars found that attitude provided a strong indication for predicting the behavioural intention (Arnold *et al.*, 2005; Ni *et al.*, 2012). In some cases, attitude does not have a significant relationship with intention. For example, Zhang *et al.* (2015) found that attitude does not have a

significant relationship with career intention while Chang (1998) found that attitude has only a slight impact on intention.

**Objective 3: To identify the key issues facing undergraduates with regard to their career aspirations**

The objective of this study is to identify the key issues facing undergraduates with regard to their career aspirations; all of the respondents agreed with the statement that the key issues exerted much influence on career aspiration. External factors such as political changes, economic pressures and social factors also directly affect the career aspirations. Also, intense competition among the graduates passing out from various private and public educational institutions, lack of financial facilities to follow the professional courses, stiff requirements of professional courses, and lack of fluency in English are the other major issues in the formation of career aspirations. In addition to that, the limited practical knowledge that Sri Lankan undergraduates possess is another hurdle they face in the world of work. Career guidance provided by the university has been another crucial factor in determining the career growth of Sri Lankan undergraduates. But some factors like the lack of awareness of and the lack of dispersion of career guidance units' services have affected in a negative manner the career aspirations of Sri Lankan undergraduates.

*“Lack of experience would be a key issue, and failure to keep up-to-date on the latest developments in the field of chemistry would be an added issue”*

Respondent 01, Representing 1, (a), (F) Personal Interview, 2017

*“Obtaining a decent job by itself would be a hard thing. The number of Arts graduates coming from the university system along with the external graduates passing out in the country is a major issue, since it would intensify the competition for jobs”*

Respondent 04, Representing 1, (d), (M) Personal Interview, 2017

This finding is mentioned in the past literature, as per McKenzie, Neilson and Palmer (2015). Information technology students' career aspirations were constrained by lack of industrial experience, financial barriers, emotional barriers and other issues related to university education. Further, Bojuwoye and Mbanjwa (2006) found that career choices of tertiary students from previously disadvantaged schools are negatively impacted by lack of finance, lack of career information, poor academic performance and unsatisfactory career counseling services. Further, Jing Sun and Yuen (2012) noted that there is a lack of well-structured and purposeful guidance to assist students' career planning in a practical and personalized way. In addition to that, Litoiu and Oproiu (2012) revealed that within the established career counseling and guidance centers in universities in Bucharest, only a few of them were really implementing specific activities they were expected to perform, such as supporting students, graduates and interested employers.

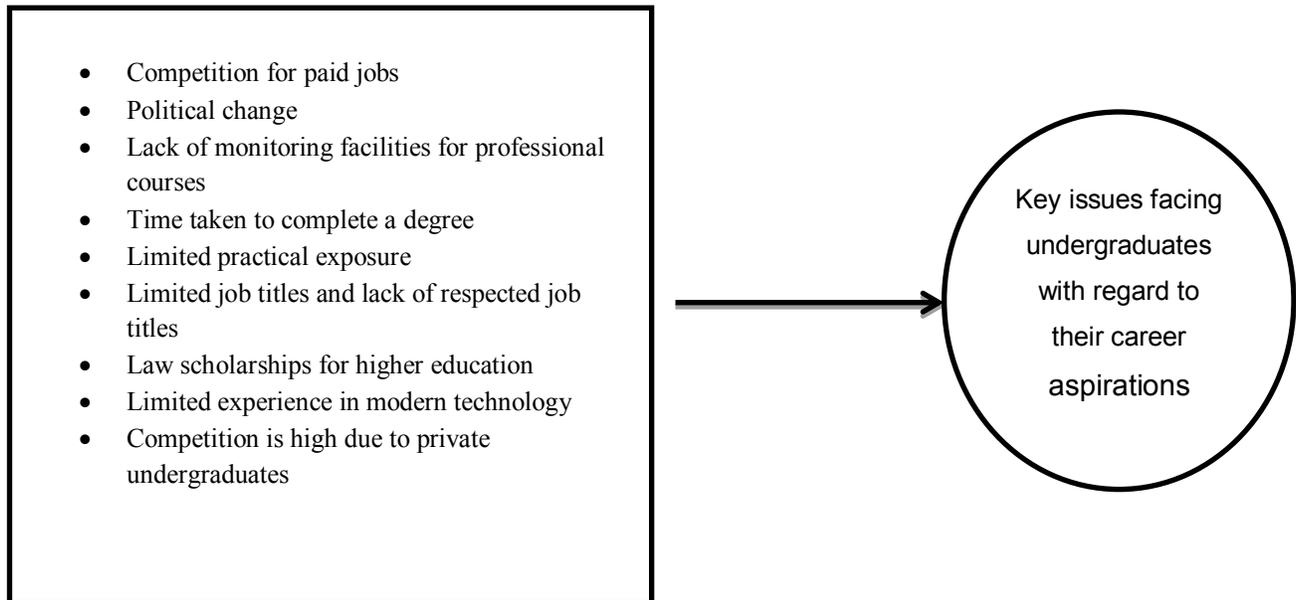


Figure 1.1: Key issues facing undergraduates with regard to their career aspirations  
Source: Survey Data, 2017

## 5. Conclusion

Being the most secure path to ensure employability as per the belief of most Sri Lankans, university education plays a major role in the Sri Lankan societal context. However, the undergraduates face numerous challenges after completing their university degree, especially when seeking suitable employment opportunities. Based on this reality, the career aspirations of undergraduates have become a major concern, since the desired career paths and the related career behaviours are subject to many constraints. This study was conducted mainly to define the career aspiration concept in the context of current Sri Lankan undergraduates, to identify the factors that affect their career aspirations and to identify the key issues facing undergraduates with regard to their career aspirations.

This study defined career aspiration as the “identification of an appropriate professional path during the period of undergraduate studies with realistic vision by considering future career targets and goals through which the final objective could be achieved,” and indicated that subjective norms, perceived behavioural control and attitude are the factors that affect different career aspirations of the undergraduates in Sri Lanka. In most situations attitude had a positive relationship with the career aspiration and it had an influence on the other two constructs. Finally, key issues were identified as lack of experience, heavy competition, political changes and lack of financial facilities; all of the respondents agreed with the statement that the identified issues exert a great influence on career aspirations. This research is a significant mine of information for the policy makers and decision makers in reforming the university

education system of the Island so that the universities can meaningfully contribute towards the career development of undergraduates.

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