Factor Affecting Employability and Hiring Decisions of Arts and Science Graduates: A Study of Employers Perceptions

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Abstract: This paper assesses employer perceptions concerning the level of campus placement activities of their arts and science colleges and determines the order of importance of various factors, as perceived by students, relating to employers' selection criteria. This paper aims to identify the factors that can affect the overall graduate employability (OGE) of the arts and science colleges graduates of Tiruchirappalli. The authors collected the primary data from a valid sample of 260 employers through a structured questionnaire working as the hiring managers. Those respondents were selected on a random basis. The authors used exploratory factor analysis to validate the items under those independent variables and structural equation modeling with AMOS (20) to test the hypothesized relationship between each independent variable and the dependent one. After proper statistical analysis, the results revealed that AP, PE, CS and TPSS can positively and significantly influence the OGE of Tiruchirappalli arts and science graduates while LMS and TS have positive but insignificant influence over OGE. Based on the findings, this paper can help scholars in further investigating the employability factors. The major implication of the study is that the gap in perception between students and employers needs to be bridged through collaboration between arts and Science College and industry.

Key words: Graduate Employability, Graduate Students, Skills, Hiring Decisions

Introduction

The Indian economy currently has a surplus of labor supply, with a large number of students graduating every year and entering the labor market (Kramarz and Skans, 2014; Liu-Farrer and Shire, 2020). The students typically expect their institutions to offer them placements by the end of their study program and that they will get the job of their choice. They also have certain perceptions about the expectations of employers visiting the campus for placements that will affect the decision to select or reject their application. The primary aim of any educational institution is to provide a contribution to national progress by creating a healthy knowledge pool and providing job opportunities for young people (Gopinath, 2019 a). Institutions therefore organize campus recruitment and placement activities in collaboration with various companies in an effort to find appropriate placements for their students

and at the same time build their brand worth. The companies need fresh and energetic recruits who can be turned into high-quality and profit-generating human resources (Gopinath, 2020 a).

One of the pre-conditions of higher education is to produce entrepreneurs and employable graduates who can serve their respective organizations, society and the country in general through their dedication and innovative skills (Gopinath & Kalpana, 2020). As we cannot expect all the graduates to be independent entrepreneurs, we can well assume that majority of the graduates in a country will search for suitable entry-level jobs according to their knowledge, skills and previous performance (Gopinath & Chitra, 2020). The employment rate of graduates is frequently considered as a performance indicator to determine the value of higher education by the governments and international rankings (Teichler, 2009). The prospective students also pay attention to the employment prospects while selecting a university to pursue their higher study. Considering the increasing cost of higher education such as tuition fees and other charges, the national and global competition for attracting students is becoming more rigorous (Gopinath, 2020 b).

Campus placement is a process through which companies visit educational institutions to recruiting graduating students and offering placements to the most deserving applicants before the completion of their degree program (Gopinath,2019 b). Thus students, the recruiting companies and the higher educational institution are the major stakeholders in the campus placement process (Neill and Mulholland, 2003). Campus recruitment provides an opportunity for the building of sustainable relationships between these stakeholders. The process helps students in their career exploration and career path considerations just before they enter the labor market – and they have a chance to select the employers and the jobs of their choice (Gopinath, 2020 c). Due to the long-term effect of the global recession that began in 2008; and the very recent pandemic situation, the world economy is becoming shrinking substantially. One of the ultimate consequences of such a shrinking world economy is the less purchasing power of general people leading to less production and finally, less employment generation. Therefore, graduate employability has been and will continue to be the talk of the forum for the upcoming period. As a result of many changing circumstances, many countries will observe fewer jobs rather than new graduates at least for the next few years until the national economies will gain their regular speed (Gopinath, 2020 d).

In such a time, there is a fundamental and mounting requirement for conducting some empirical studies to investigate the skill sets that the employers are looking for. There are quite a lot of theoretical and empirical research studies that have enriched academia (Jayasingha and Suraweera, 2020; Weligamage, 2009; Gopinath, 2020 e). However, despite a large number of studies, graduate employability appears to be suffering from the problems of lack of theoretical control. Furthermore, the concept of graduate employability is changing rapidly due to the external natural, political and economic circumstances such as recession, war and very recently, the outbreak of COVID-19. Therefore, the authors believe that there is still a need for further investigations on this specific and vital area of business and economics.

Literature Review

Graduate employability can generally be defined as the compilation of a series of skills and abilities that a graduate can obtain to achieve a desirable job and succeed in his/her career (Chen, 2017; Tomlinson, 2012). Such skills and capabilities enable the graduate job candidates to meet the desired requirements of employers and adapt to changes in the labor market. It is a type of all-inclusive set of skills and abilities to improve future career development. Based on the existing published research works that primarily started from the 1990s, can be separated into two categories. The first one is from the standpoint of employment performance which proposes that employability is a combination of

multifaced dimensions, including interior and exterior factors. The internal factors include personal knowledge and skills associated with the job such as technical and team working skills, while the external factors include the condition of the labor market such as labor demand and supply (Tholen, 2014).

Shenoy and Aithal (2016) identified challenges students faced during campus placements and found that they were unhappy with the procedures, as they were forced to adjust their attitude and personality to match the requirements of corporate culture. They were also dissatisfied with the unstable framework of the campus recruitment and corporate tie-ins of their institutions. Shenoy and Aithal (2016) and Gopinath (2020 f) also noted that institutions faced problems in managing campus recruitment activities – such as providing adequate facilities (e.g. a suitable auditorium, separate rooms for different interview rounds of interviews, microphones, speakers, etc) for visiting corporations; uncertainty about the number of selections; making time for the placement process and preparation from the limited period of the semester; no right of intervention by the HEI after the final campus selections; and the lack of a dedicated campus recruitment framework between the institution and corporations. The second set of skills and capabilities can be viewed from the standpoint of personal ability that considers the graduate employability is the outcome of individual ability and is a collection of competitive skills and abilities that help the graduates to attain employment and develop (Tholen, 2014). Therefore, graduate employability is a complete set of skills to improve graduates to further career development (Finch *et al.*, 2013). As a sort of personal ability, the composition of graduate employability includes basic personal and social attributes, leadership skills, communication skills (CS) and teamwork skills (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005). However, the existing most researched studies emphasized that graduate employability is a sort of "soft skills" to acquire jobs and getting career success.

Several studies have highlighted factors considered by employers at the time of hiring graduates, with most focusing on personality traits and skills. Most commonly, a potential employee's knowledge, capabilities, skills, personality and value orientations with respect to the job requirements have been identified as the key criteria for hiring and selection (Caldwell and O'Reilly, 1990;). Schmitt and Chan (1998), however, contend that, rather than matching the job description with an individual's knowledge skills abilities (KSA), it is more important to understand the nature of the hiring procedure and what influences it. Jusoh *et al.* (2007) identified prominent gaps between employers' demands and graduates' skills and abilities; however, employers were satisfied with the potential of fresh graduates. Previous research studies have identified a number of numbers of factors that can affect graduate employability. A study conducted by Weligamage and Siengthai (2003) on "employer needs and graduate skills" establishes seven vital expected factors that employers consider when recruiting fresh graduates are CS, general knowledge, personality (PE), computer and IT skills, verbal CS, realistic experience and educational background. According to Paddi (2014), most sought-after graduates should be proficient in teamwork, communication, analytic & critical thinking and IT skill. As pointed by Liyanage *et al.* (2016), graduates' realistic knowledge, logical ability, dedication to work, communication & IT skills, management skills and positive attitudes are the highly concerned factors among employers. Another study says that two management education institutes in Sri Lanka observed that academic knowledge, soft, practical and technical skill development are the major factors that prepare a graduate ready for employment. Those results also concluded that although academic knowledge is an important factor, it is not the sole one for the effective employability of graduates (Jayasingha and Suraweera, 2020). However, this study considered six pre-selected factors for graduate employability in the Bangladeshi job scenario. Those six factors are academic performance (AP), technical skills (TS), communication skills

(CS), personality (PE), leadership & motivational skills (LMS); and teamwork problem solving skills (TPSS).

Dhingra (2018) found that performance at the interview is most important for employers' that attend campus placement events, followed by the resume presentation and internship experience. And also found that the letter of application and external recommendations were of negligible importance, while specialization, academic scores and the reputation of the institution moderately affected selection decisions during campus recruitment. El-Temtamy *et al.* (2016) found that marks, campus location and the subject of study positively supported graduate employability and increased the chances of employment on graduation. Academic performance (AP) is generally indicated through grade point average (GPA) or cumulative grade point average (CGPA) measured by various academic indicators such as class performance, assignments, presentation skills; and exam results. Numerous scholars identified a positive association between AP and OGE. Pinto and Ramalheira (2017) examined whether the AP and the participation in extra-curricular activities (ECA) affect the perceived employability of business graduates using an experimental study between-subjects factorial design on 349 Portuguese working adults. They found that AP published through GPA is the key to lift up business graduates' employability. GPA and ECAs jointly foster business graduates' employability.

Technical skill (TS) refers to the skills related to learning and acquiring different tools and techniques such as software, computer and IT. In a present competitive world, such a set of skills are quite essential due to the rapid changes in adopting IT and Internet. Furthermore, an employee is expected to be competent in using different software although those competencies vary according to the nature of the jobs. The employers require employees to have both TS. Another recent study conducted in Sri Lanka by Jayasingha and Suraweera (2020) found that TS such as IT skills can partially influence OGE and have not reflected a significant impact on OGE. In a very recent study carried out in Bangladesh, Hossain *et al.* (2020) identified that both soft skills and TS are positively related to employability, which is consistent with prior studies. They suggested creating more technically skilled graduates particularly in a Bangladeshi job market where labor supply is abundant but skilled candidates are scarce.

Personality (PE) indicates a distinctive manner of thinking, feeling and behaving. It embraces moods, attitudes and opinions; and is expressed while interactions with other people. It includes behavioral uniqueness, both inherent and acquired, that distinguishes one person from another and that can be observed through a person's relationships to the environment and the social groups. The employability attributes and PE preferences of postgraduate business management students in South Africa and found significant relationships between the participants' PE preferences and their employability attributes. Neneh (2019) conducted an empirical study on PE traits, job market appraisal and self-perceived employability in an uncertain market and ultimately revealed that agreeableness, conscientiousness and openness to experience are positively and significantly associated with self-perceived employability. Based on the literature, this study included PE as one of the factors influencing graduate employability.

Commutation skill (CS) generally refers to the ability to communicate with others effectively through sending and receiving the intended meaning. It can be done face to face, online or by mail. Effective communication and interaction reduce the perception bias, time and effort to enhance further efficiency. Rasul *et al.* (2013) investigated the graduate employability factors for the manufacturing industry and identified that employers place great importance on CS, problem-solving skills, teamwork skills and personal qualities. They argued that the graduates also need to emphasize leadership skills, entrepreneur skills, technology skills and informational skills. Another study conducted by Shah and

Srivastava (2014) on the factors affecting the employability skills of management students and revealed that four factors: analytical skills & self-understanding, general management & work culture, leadership & problem-solving ability and communication make a significant impact on employability skills of management graduates. A recent study European countries identified that soft skills including communication skills, interpersonal skills and problem-solving skills increase the likelihood of employability of the students/graduates. Leadership skills refer to effectively lead a team or subordinate(s) whereas motivational skills refer to motivate and positively influence a team or working partners. A good leader is always supposed to motivate and guide his/her followers or subordinates in a constructive manner. Rasul *et al.* (2013) investigated the graduate employability factors for the manufacturing industry and recognized that the graduates need to emphasize leadership & motivational skill (LMS) along with other qualities.

Team working indicates an interpersonal skill of a person who can effectively communicate with a team and can accomplish his/her role as a part of the team. On the other hand, problem-solving skill refers to effectively solving a practical or simulated problem in an efficient manner. Teamwork and problem solving skills (TPSS) are the two vital skills that make a job candidate competent in any situation. Numerous studies confirmed that these two skills are imperative for a graduate in getting an expected job. Gowsalya and Kumar (2015) identified that TPSS can highly increase the chance of a graduate being employed. This explorative study involves six independent variables with one single dependent variable: OGE. The theoretical model has been illustrated in the following diagram (Figure 1):
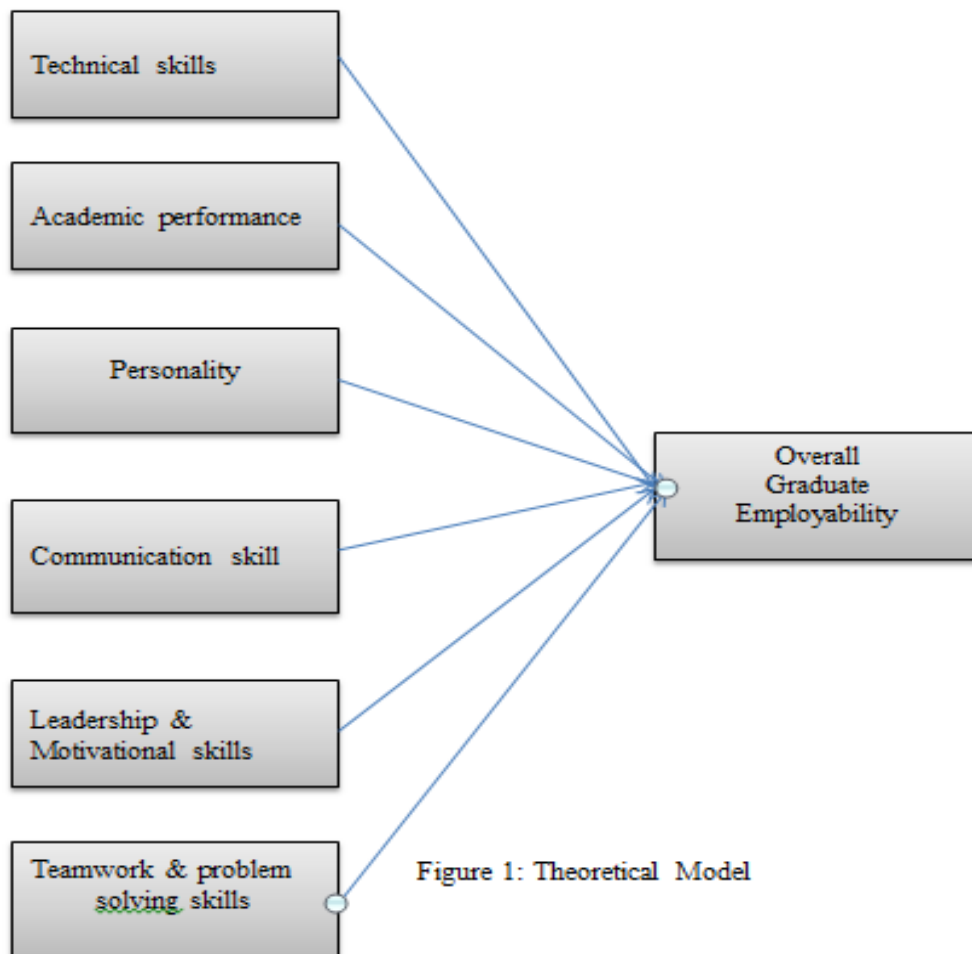

Figure 1: Theoretical Model

Research Method

Primary data were collected for this explorative study as the secondary information are not suitable for the quantitative scale measurement. A detailed structured survey questionnaire was used to collect data from the respondents who had been chosen using a random sampling method from the Tiruchirappalli District. Initially, 300 questionnaires were distributed to the employers and HR professionals working as the recruitment and selection officers at 10 job sectors in Tamilnadu. Afterward, the authors received 270 questionnaires (with a response rate of 92.5%) where 10 questionnaires were found incomplete, biased and/or abnormally answered, and hence discarded through scrutinizing process. Finally, the valid data (n) used for this study was 260. However, 260 respondents had been taken as valid in this study. The analysis was made by using multivariate analysis techniques such as confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modeling.

This study selected 260 recruiting officers working at 10 different job sectors in Tamilnadu. A structured questionnaire with 22 items was used to collect the data developed by literature review. This structured questionnaire with a five-point Likert scale was used for collecting the pertinent data from the respondents. Table 1 highlights the number of items for each independent variable and the dependent one.

Validity and Reliability

If numerous items are used to determine an individual construct, the items' (indicator) convergent validity should be one of the main concerns to the researcher that can be explained as the degree to which multiple items to measure the identical concept are in concord (Hair *et al.*, 2010; Ramamoorthy *et al.*, 2016; Gopinath, 2019 c).

Sl. No	Variables	No of Items
1	Technical skill	3
2	Academic performance	3
3	Personality	3
4	Communication Skills	3
5	Leadership and motivational skills	3
6	Teamwork and problem-solving skills	3
7	Overall graduate employability	4

According to Hair *et al.* (2010), convergent validity could be accessed through composite reliability (CR). The results of the measurement model (Table 2) indicate that the factor loadings for all items surpassed the recommended value of 0.70 (Gopinath *et al.*, 2020). The CR values ranged from 0.72 to 0.93 which exceeded the recommended value of 0.70. On the other hand, to analyze the reliability (internal consistency) of the variables, this study used the Cronbach's alpha coefficient and CR value. Table 2 shows that all the Cronbach's alpha values are above 0.60 cutoff values as suggested by Nunnally and Bernstein (1994). Therefore, the results of reliability and validity indicate that each individual itemis internally consistent and has a fairly high degree of reliability.

Factor	LMS	EM	TPS	TS	PE	AP	CS
LMS	0.83						
EM	0.457**	0.71					
TPS	0.122	0.06	0.80				
TS	0.362**	0.303**	0.07	0.83			
PE	0.260*	0.647**	0.08	0.572**	0.73		

AP	0.02	-0.088	0.313**	0.223**	0.05	0.70	
CS	-0.08	0.359**	0.199**	0.369**	0.10	0.03	0.76

Note: Significance of correlations: **p < 001; * p< 05

Analysis and Interpretation

Structural Equation Model is used to test and eliminate causal relationship in a combination of statistical data and qualitative caused assumptions. There is no difficulty in hypothesis testing in SEM because it takes the confirmatory approach rather than the exploratory approach. Many sub-criteria are considered under each criterion. This is the reason why the relative weightage arrived from SEM is considered more valid than through any other approach. This model also takes measurement error into account when analyzing the data statistically. SEM is capable of estimating or assessing measurement error. It can incorporate both observed and latent variables. To evaluate whether the dataset used in this research was valid for the suggested model or not, model fitness analysis was carried out for the confirmation and modification of the model. The model's fitness was verified by using three types of fit measures which were an absolute fit measure that included $\chi 2$, a goodness-of-fitness index (GFI) and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA); incremental fit measures that included an adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI), a normed fit index (NFI), a comparative fit index (CFI), an incremental fit index (IFI) and a relative fit index (RFI); and parsimony fit measures that included a parsimony comparative fit index (PCFI), a parsimony normed fit index (PNFI) (Gopinath *et al.*, 2020; Ramamoorthy *et al.*, 2016).

Confirmatory Analysis

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) is a statistical technique used to verify the factor structure of a set of observed variables. CFA allows the researchers to confirm that the variables are related to the respective factor. The relative Chi-Square for this model was 3.097 that is smaller than 5.0 as recommended by Marsh and Hocevar (1985) while other fit indexes also showed a good fit for the measurement model. The GFI of the model is 0.903 which is more than the recommended value of 0.90 suggested by Anderson and Gerbing (1984). The summary result of the analysis is shown in Figure 2 and Table 3. The fit indices showed a good model fit to the data.

In the present study, the adjusted goodness of fit index (AGFI) was found to be 0.896 which meets the recommended value of (>0.85), hence deemed to be a good fit and acceptable supported by Anderson and Gerbing (1984). Furthermore, the non-incremental fit index such as the comparative fit index (CFI) is 0.903 that exceeds the recommended cut-off level of 0.90. In the CFA, the root mean residual (RMR) value was found to be 0.074, which is less than 0.08 and is commonly recommended as acceptable. The root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) is 0.072, which is also less than the suggested good fit to the data. Finally, the standardized means square residual (SRMR) is 0.079 which is less than 0.08 recommend by Gopinath (2020).

Table. 3 Model fit indices and their acceptable thresholds

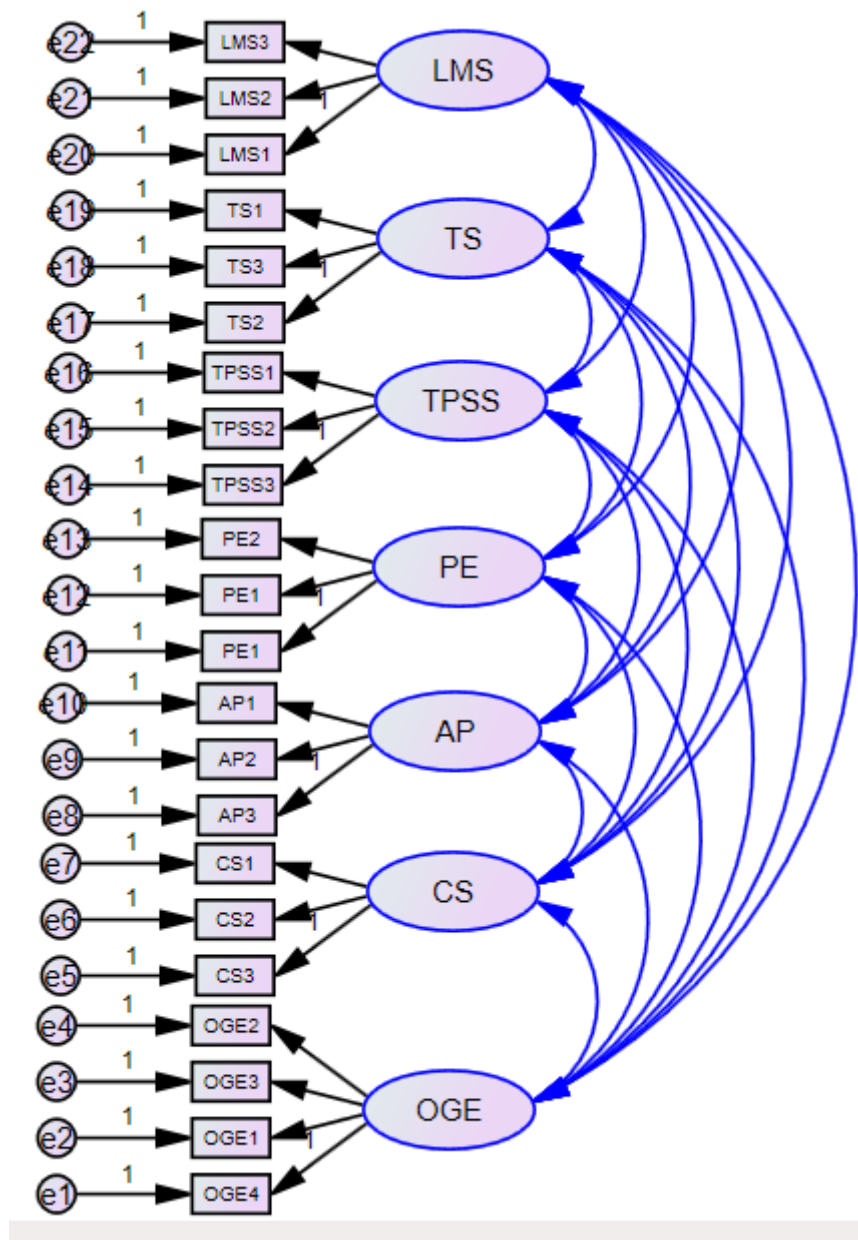| Goodness of Fit Indices	Value	Level of Acceptance
Chi-square/df	2.097	<5.0
CFI	0.918	>0.90
RMR	0.074	<0.08
GFI	0.903	>0.90
AGFI	0.896	>0.85
RMSEA	0.072	<0.08

Figure: 2 Confirmatory factor analysis

Structural Equation Model

A multivariate analysis technique (covariance-based structural equation modeling) was utilized to identify the significant relationships among six different employability factors. The overall factor concerning the employability of the private university graduates of Bangladesh and the six factors identified through factor analysis have been listed in Table 4 with the structural parameter estimates and hypothesis testing results.

The path diagram of this study revealed that four factors: AP, PE, TPSS and CS together can significantly explain 36.3% of employability of arts and science graduates (Table 4) supporting the hypotheses H1, H3, H4 and H6. On the other hand, two factors: LMS and TS have a positive but

insignificant influence over the single dependent variable OGE. Therefore, hypotheses H2 and H5 had been rejected. The structural equation model has been shown in Table 4 and Figure 3.
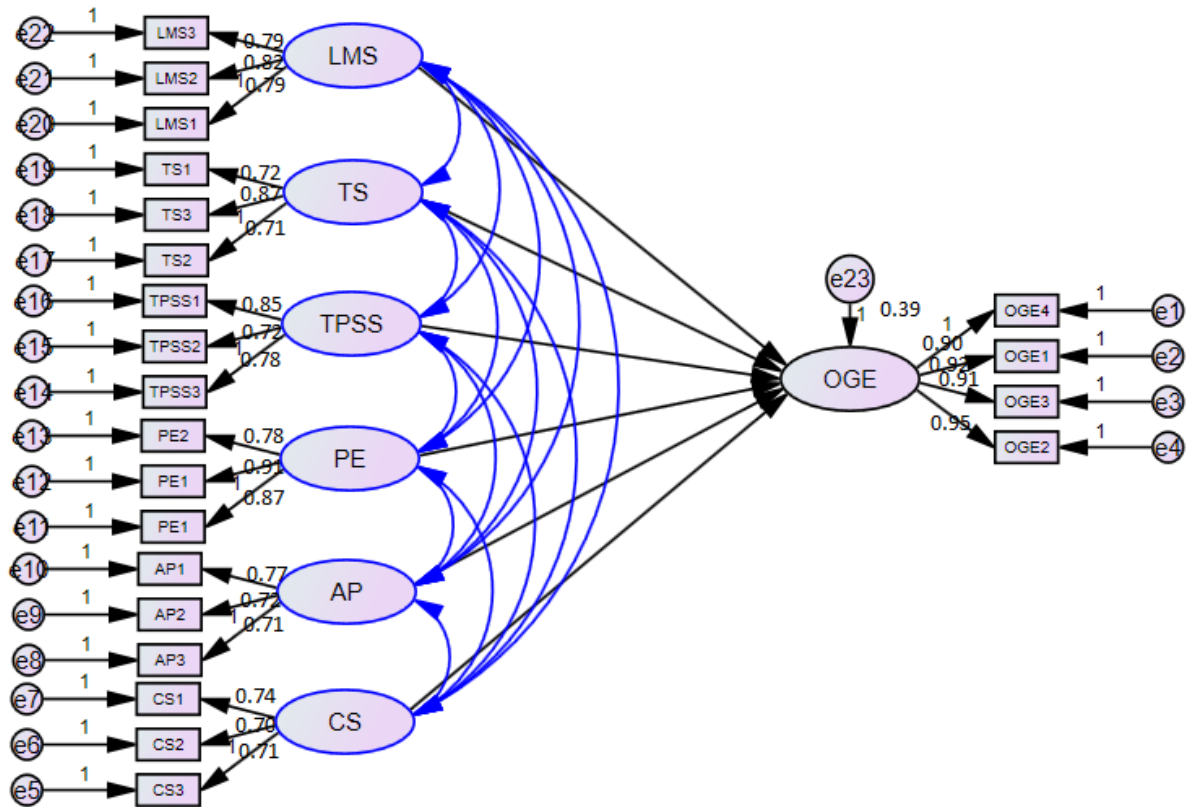

Figure 3: Structural Model

Discussion and Results

The results of this exploratory investigation point that all of the six selected factors have positive effects on the OGE of arts and science graduates. However, four of them (AP, PE, CS, TPSS) can strongly influence the overall employability supporting the major previous findings of Helena and Kena (2019), Neneh (2019). On the other hand, according to the analysis, LMS and TS can inadequately influence graduate employability. Such results largely oppose the previous findings while having a limited consistency with the findings. As the job market perspective is different in different countries, such results are not very unusual. However, although the last two mentioned factors cannot adequately influence the OGE, they are still essential as two important skills that can enhance the chance of getting expected jobs.

Table 4: Regression weights

Relationship	Hypothesis	Estimate	S.E	C.R.	P value	Decision
AP →OGE	H1	0.163	0.065	2.282	0.012	Supported
TS →OGE	H2	0.030	0.074	0.408	0.658	Not supported
PE →EM	H3	0.235	0.079	2.836	0.002	Supported
CS →EM	H4	0.199	0.087	2.956	0.001	Supported
LMS →EM	H5	0.155	0.101	1.240	0.253	Not supported
TPSS →EM	H6	0.586	0.067	7.830	0.000	Supported

Source: Structural equation modeling (AMOS 20)

Employability has been always a center of attraction to the university management, researchers, economists and obviously the graduates themselves. This research is expected to contribute to the

understanding of employability skills that can affect the OGE in Tiruchirappalli district work settings. As an important research priority for any country, more and more empirical investigations are required to be conducted in this area. The authors expect that this empirical study can enrich such effort to a further extent. On the other hand, these empirical findings will drop some guided results for the new graduates allowing them to amplify in boosting their skill set. Moreover, the employers can also get some clues from the studies like this one.

Conclusion

The study has several limitations that need to be pointed out. First of all, the study was limited to only the private university graduates of Tiruchirappalli district. Second, the scope of this study was limited to only a few skills based on one particular state. Therefore, there is a gap that could be bridged and an opportunity to conduct further analysis on this important area of management. The authors are expecting that more and more empirical investigations will be conducted in the future considering the above limitations and overcoming them. Although within the present optimistic economy, a growing number of development projects and rapid industrialization are expected to create the necessary levels of employment for the university graduates, it cannot guarantee a perfect match between graduate qualities and employer needs. Therefore, establishing the relationship between the two would necessitate in-depth research studies. The perspectives of all the stakeholders such as graduates, employers and tertiary education providers need to be sought after to offer a holistic view of multifaceted employability factors. In an age of globalization, no nation can sufficiently evaluate the applicability or relevance of any factor or factors that indicate the employers' needs. The outcomes and implications will be heading toward the interests of a broader educational community beyond that of private higher education providers. Finally, the graduates must be adaptive to all the latest technologies and skill sets required by the job and the changing employment scenario.

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