



# The expectation-performance gap in generic skills in accounting graduates

## Evidence from Sri Lanka

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to investigate the generic skills that are important for the career success of accounting graduates in Sri Lanka from the perspectives of university educators and employers.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Bui and Porter's (2010) expectation-performance gap framework was modified to match with the context of the current study. Data collected via questionnaire survey was analysed for non-parametric tests: the Wilcoxon signed-rank test and the Mann-Whitney test, using SPSS version 20, and quantified the expectation-performance gap and its components.

**Findings** – The major finding of this research is that the main cause for the expectation-performance gap, as identified in the analysis of the constraint gap is university educators' low confidence in teaching the required generic skills for career success of graduates. However, university educators are aware of the employer expectations of graduate accountants in terms of generic skills. Employers indicated that many of the generic skills are not achieved by the accounting graduates.

**Practical implications** – Findings of this study reflect the importance of expanding the accounting curricula by embedding and assessing generic skill development activities. In addition, it is vital to develop the capacities of university educators in terms of teaching and assessing generic skills in accounting degree programmes.

**Originality/value** – This study contributes to the literature as one of few studies that investigate the generic skills development of accounting graduates in Asia, particularly in Sri Lanka.

**Keywords** Sri Lanka, Generic skills, Expectation-performance gap

**Paper type** Research paper

### 1. Introduction

Prior research indicates that accounting graduates are equipped with basic accounting and analytical skills. However, they lack sufficient generic skills in areas such as team work, interpersonal and communication skills, which are important for their employability and career success (Albin and Crockett, 1991; Kavanagh and Drennan, 2008; Jackling and De Lange, 2009; Wells *et al.*, 2009; Tempone *et al.*, 2012). In this study we define generic skills as: those capabilities required by graduate accountants for employability and career success.

Findings of research investigating the perceptions of key stakeholders of accounting degree programmes such as employers, graduates, undergraduates and professional bodies show that there is a link between generic skills and career success (Albrecht and Sack, 2000; Arquero Montano *et al.*, 2001; Lin, 2008; Lin *et al.*, 2005; Watty, 2005; Kavanagh and Drennan, 2008; Jackling and De Lange, 2009;



Wells *et al.*, 2009; Awayiga *et al.*, 2010; Bui and Porter, 2010). These findings indicate employers desire that accounting graduates equip themselves with higher order generic skills, in addition to technical accounting skills. This highlights the importance of embedding and assessing generic skills in accounting curricula, rather than focusing only on technical skills (Albin and Crockett, 1991; Gammie *et al.*, 2002; Tempone and Martin, 2003; Arquero Montaña *et al.*, 2004; Fortin and Legault, 2010; Healy and McCutcheon, 2010; Willcoxson *et al.*, 2010).

Although studies have reported that accounting graduates lack the generic skills required in the modern business environment, most have not focused on finding the causes for the generic skills shortage. In this paper, we identify the gaps in generic skills by comparing the importance of generic skills to career success of graduates and graduates' achievement of generic skills, from the perspectives of university educators and employers. In addition, we find the contributory causes for the gaps in generic skills. The current paper builds on the findings of the first part of the exploratory research undertaken to investigate generic skills in accounting graduates in Sri Lanka. The first part of the research was designed to find the final year undergraduates' perceptions about generic skills and found that final year accounting undergraduates were aware of the skills expectation in the employment market. Also they prioritised generic skills above technical skills for career success. However, they were not satisfied with their generic skills developed during the degree (Abayadeera and Watty, 2011). Given the outcome of our previous study, the primary motivation of the current study is to investigate the generic skills development of accounting graduates from the perspectives of university educators and employers of accounting graduates. Investigation of the perceptions of broader stakeholder groups provides a complete view of generic skills development of accounting graduates. Further, it is important to find the contributory causes for the generic skills deficiencies, when suggesting the best possible ways to minimise the gaps in generic skills.

Bui and Porter (2010) developed a framework of the expectation-performance gap of accounting education, based on the prior literature and data collected from a New Zealand university. We adapt their framework and identify and quantify the gaps in generic skills in accounting education. Further, we investigate the contributory causes for the accounting graduates' deficient generic skills in Sri Lanka, from the perspectives of university educators and employers. The findings of this study contribute to the literature by providing evidence of a lack of confidence by university educators in relation to teaching (and by extension assessing) generic skills in accounting education.

There are contextual differences between the accounting education systems in Sri Lanka and New Zealand. For example, the three elements of an accounting education system (academic qualification, professional qualification and practical experience) are systematically aligned with each other in New Zealand. However, in Sri Lanka, students pursue a professional accounting qualification concurrent with their undergraduate degree and practical experience (Watty *et al.*, 2013). Many students enrol in professional accounting programmes prior to enrolling in degree programmes. Sri Lankan students have very limited opportunity to develop generic skills during their secondary education time compared with New Zealand students. The main reason is Sri Lankan students spend nearly half of their secondary education time preparing for the extremely competitive GCE (A/L)[1], the university entrance examination. Further, the motivation level of Sri Lankan university educators are relatively low, due to their low salaries. For example, in 2012 the Sri Lankan university

teachers' union has launched trade union action across all government universities and actively engaged in a series of protests that constitutes a large struggle with the Sri Lankan government. Their demands include: to increase salaries of university educators and to allocate 6 per cent of GDP to national education complying with UNESCO standards (Federation of University Teachers' Association (FUTA), 2013).

In the next section of the paper we briefly discuss the literature related to generic skills required for the career success of graduates, with a view to developing the research framework for the expectation-performance gap, its components and the research questions. The research method is then described with special attention to the degree programme considered in this research. Analysis of results and interpretations are presented in Section 4, addressing each research question, followed by the conclusion, limitations and areas for further research.

## 2. Literature review, development of research framework and justification of research questions

This section reviews the literature related to generic skills, with a particular focus on studies of employer expectations of generic skills developed in graduates, and the gaps between expectations and performance of those graduates, followed by the research framework and research questions. Employers seek accounting graduates who possess a higher order of generic skills as well as technical skills to obtain advantages in the global environment. Research investigating the employer perceptions found that accounting graduates are ill-equipped in terms of generic skills, although they have the necessary technical skills (Albin and Crockett, 1991; Kavanagh and Drennan, 2008; Jackling and De Lange, 2009; Wells *et al.*, 2009; Tempone *et al.*, 2012).

Studies investigating the employer expectations of skills of accounting graduates found that employers prioritised generic skills above technical skills (Jackling and De Lange, 2009). Similarly, Kavanagh and Drennan (2008) found that employers expect graduates to be far more "job ready" in terms of generic skills than is the case in Australia. Craig and Amernic (2002) contend that accounting educators should focus less on the technical menu and more on social critique. However, Awayiga *et al.* (2010) showed that analytical/critical thinking was rated as the most important professional skill by both employers and the graduates in Ghana.

Few researchers have analysed the employer expectations of skills and matched them with skills developed during the degree with a view to identifying the expectation gaps in skills. Exceptions include Wells *et al.* (2009) who investigated the skills regarded as being most important for successful professional practice in accounting and compared the extent to which they were developed during the accounting degrees in New Zealand. Their analysis identified many skills such as interpersonal skills; teamwork skills; intellectual skills and decision-making skills; that require improvement or follow-up. Further, Kavanagh and Drennan (2008) found noticeable gaps between graduating students' perceptions of what will be required of them at entry level and the expectations of employers.

According to Bui and Porter (2010, p. 31), the expectation-performance gap is "the difference between the competencies desired by employers and the actual competencies demonstrated by graduates"; the expectation gap is "the differences in the graduate competencies expectations of accounting academics and employers"; the constraint gap is "the competencies desired and competencies reasonably expected by university educators"; and the performance gap is "the university educators' teaching performance".

Considering the contextual differences between the two countries, Bui and Porter's (2010) framework of the accounting educator's expectation-performance gap is adapted and expanded to identify the components of the expectation-performance gap in generic skills in accounting graduates and to justify the research questions of the current study (Figure 1). Further, we account for a quantitative approach to data collection and analysis to measure the generic skills and resulting gaps.

### 2.1 Justification of research questions

Bui and Porter (2010) provide evidence to prove that an expectation-performance gap exists in accounting education in New Zealand. Further, they report the contributory causes for the expectation-performance gap: the expectation differences of the university educators and employers (expectation gap) and the poor quality of teaching in universities (performance gap). Also they report two institutional factors from the perspectives of university educators: inadequate resources and tenure and promotion policies of universities as the key obstacles to develop accounting graduates' competencies (constraint gap).

Given this, the first research question examines the expectation-performance gap in generic skills of accounting graduates. *RQ1* analyses the difference between generic skills that are important to career success, and graduates' achievement of those skills, from the perspective of employers:

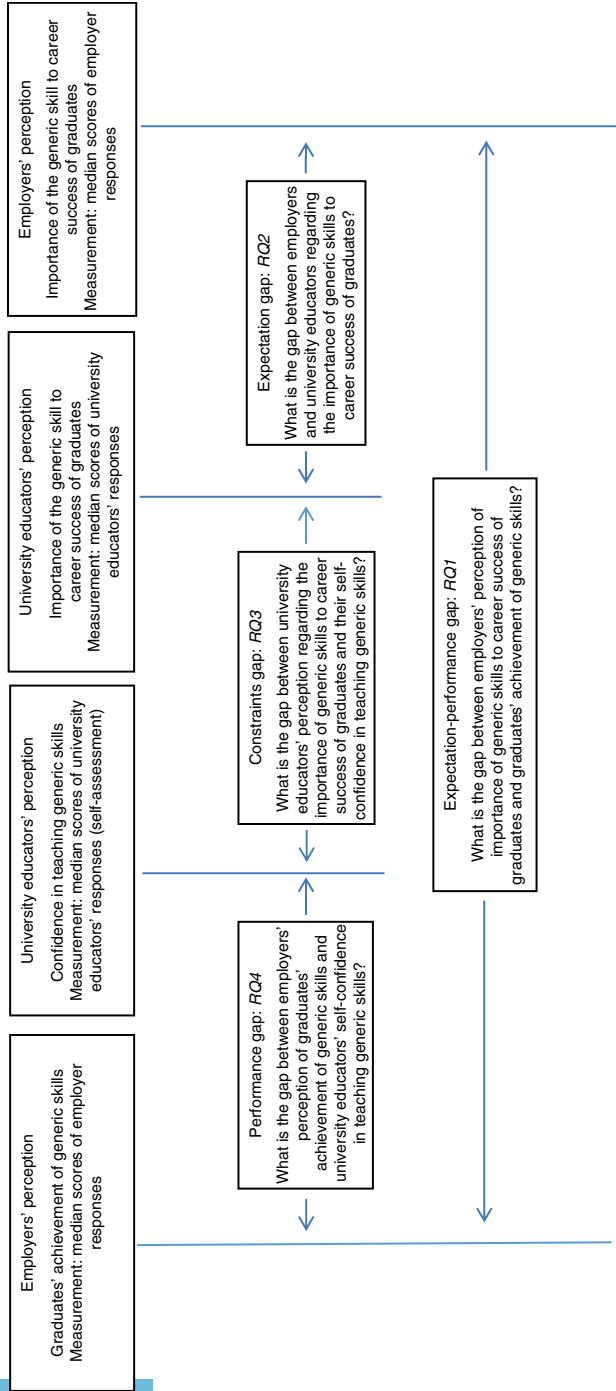
*RQ1.* What is the gap between employers' perception of importance of generic skills to career success of graduates and graduates' achievement of generic skills (expectation-performance gap)?

The primary goal of university educators is to develop students' discipline and generic skills to provide graduates with the best opportunities for future career success. Employers too expect accounting graduates to possess discipline and generic skills. *RQ2* is designed to investigate the contribution of the impact of the expectation gap on the expectation-performance gap. *RQ2* analyses the differences of perceptions between university educators and employers in terms of generic skills that are important to career success of accounting graduates:

*RQ2.* What is the gap between the perceptions of employers and university educators regarding the importance of generic skills to career success of graduates (expectation gap)?

University educators have the responsibilities of research, teaching and administration. Of which, research productivity is the key factor of their tenure and promotion policies. Having agreed that research was the dominant element in the reward system, university educators who are less active in terms of research have been demoralised (Polster, 2000; Serow, 2000) and have a negative effect on perceived teaching quality (Barrett and Milbourne, 2012). As such, the third research question is designed to investigate constraints, in terms of university educators' self-confidence in teaching generic skills that they perceive as important to career success of graduates:

*RQ3.* What is the gap between university educators' perception regarding the importance of generic skills to career success of graduates and their self-confidence in teaching generic skills (constraint gap)?



**Figure 1.**  
Framework of the expectation-performance gap in generic skills in accounting graduates

Source: Modified from Bui and Porter (2010) Framework

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The final research question assesses university educators' performance in terms of teaching generic skills in accounting degree programmes. It will find whether or not the accounting graduates achieved the generic skills that are confidently taught in accounting degree programmes:

*RQ4.* What is the gap between employers' perception of graduates' achievement of generic skills and university educators' self-confidence in teaching generic skills (performance gap)?

Having justified and explained the development of the research questions, we now move to detail the research method employed in this study.

### 3. Research method

This study is based on a pioneering accounting specialisation degree programme in Sri Lanka. The duration of the degree is four years. The length of an academic year is 24 weeks, divided into two semesters. A practical experience component (internship in accounting and finance) is embedded in the curriculum of this programme as major four units in last two years. Students spend the first two years full time in the university. They undertake internships during the day in years 3 and 4, hence lectures and tutorial classes in years 3 and 4 are held only during weekday evenings and Saturdays. The assessment design includes two summative assessments for each unit. A mid-semester, individual or group assessment and; an end-semester, closed book, three hour examination. Further, this degree programme is conducted in English to meet the demands of local as well as international markets.

This degree programme has become the most popular undergraduate course available for GCE (A/L)[2] commerce stream students. At present, only a limited number of the students (approximately 150 each year) who qualify to enter a government university in the commerce stream through the GCE (A/L) examination (about 4,000 each year) are able to enter the accounting degree programme in the university used in this study. The GCE (A/L) examination is extremely competitive and has been streamlined with university degree programmes. Only 11 per cent of students who pass this examination are selected to government universities (University Grants Commission Sri Lanka, 2012). Students spend nearly half of their secondary education time preparing for GCE (A/L) examination. As a result, they have very limited opportunities to acquire generic skills before entering the university.

#### 3.1 Data collection

Data was collected by administering questionnaire surveys to two key stakeholder groups—university educators of the accounting degree programme and graduate employers. The questions used in the Kavanagh and Drennan (2008) survey instrument were adapted to structure the questions in the questionnaire. Kavanagh and Drennan's (2008) survey instrument was validated in their Australian study, published in 2008. The skills list used in the questionnaire was rigorously developed and contextualised to Sri Lanka (Abayadeera and Watty, 2011). Questionnaires were piloted and minor amendments were made to clarify the wording of some questions.

*University educators' questionnaire.* Section 1 asked respondents to provide their demographic information, university work experience information and their role in developing generic skills of undergraduates. Section 2 required respondents to rate 25 specific skills on a scale ranging from 1 (no importance) to 5 (very high importance)



about “importance of the skill to the career success of the graduate” and 1 (no confidence) to 5 (very high confidence) about “confidence in teaching each skill”. The university educators’ survey was e-mailed to all full-time educators of the degree programme considered in this study (24 educators), with a request to respond within 15 working days. With a follow-up e-mail, 19 responses were received. This represents a response rate of 79 per cent.

*Employer questionnaire.* Section 1 asked employers to provide their demographic and employment information. Section 2 required them to rate 25 specific skills on a scale ranging from 1 (no importance) to 5 (very high importance) about “importance of the skill to the career success of the graduate”.

The employer survey was e-mailed to 250 accounting graduates with a request to forward the survey to their immediate supervisors. In total, 31 employer responses were received. The effective response rate of employers is low (12.4 per cent). This level of response is somewhat disappointing as it raises concerns over non-response bias. However, others argue it is acceptable when employing a self-report survey method (Sekaran, 1992; Jackling and De Lange, 2009). Further, the weight of the employers’ response may be higher than the number of questionnaires collected, because their responses may represent the evaluation of more than one accounting graduate under their supervision.

### 3.2 Data analysis

The expectation-performance gap and its components are identified by comparing median scores of the responses. The median scores are compared using non-parametric tests, particularly because of the small sample size. Further, non-parametric tests have the obvious advantage of not requiring the assumption of normality or the assumption of homogeneity of variance ([www.Une.Edu.Au/Webstat/Unit\\_Materials/C6\\_Common\\_Statistical\\_Tests/Nonparametric\\_Test.html](http://www.Une.Edu.Au/Webstat/Unit_Materials/C6_Common_Statistical_Tests/Nonparametric_Test.html)). Accordingly, the Wilcoxon signed-rank test was used to identify and measure the expectation-performance gap and constraint gap and the Mann-Whitney test was used to identify and measure the expectation gap and the performance gap in this study.

## 4. Results and interpretations

Results of the study and their interpretations are presented in this section for each of the four research questions:

*RQ1.* What is the gap between employers’ perception of importance of generic skills to career success of graduates and graduates’ achievement of generic skills (expectation-performance gap)?

The expectation-performance gap reflects the skill deficiencies (if any) of accounting graduates as perceived by employers ( $n = 31$ ). Table I presents the employers’ perceptions about generic skills: importance of the skill to career success of graduates, graduates’ achievement of the skill and the difference between importance and achievement (expectation-performance gap).

The expectation-performance gap of each skill is calculated by comparing the median scores for the responses of “importance of the skill to career success of graduates” and “graduates’ achievement of skill”. Median scores are compared using the Wilcoxon signed-rank test, using SPSS 20. This analysis is consistently applied also for *RQ3*, while Mann-Whitney test was applied for *RQ2* and *RQ4*.

Skill list	Importance of the skill to career success of graduates ( <i>n</i> = 31)		Graduates' achievement of skill ( <i>n</i> = 31)		Expectation-performance gap	
	Median	Variance	Median	Variance	gap	z value
Work ethics, attitudes and values	5	0.265	4	0.695	3.314**	
Dedication, self-motivation and meeting tight deadlines	5	0.368	4	0.606	3.557**	
Achieve given targets by the management	5	0.452	4	0.426	1.761	
Intellectual	5	0.256	4	0.632	3.578**	
Decision making	5	0.323	4	0.366	3.626**	
Leadership	5	0.256	4	0.357	3.071**	
Problem solving	5	0.525	4	0.514	3.989**	
Oral communication in English	5	0.389	4	0.892	3.487**	
Interpersonal team work	5	0.456	4	0.540	2.324*	
Critical thinking	4	0.378	4	0.514	3.035**	
Written communication in English	4	0.426	4	0.598	3.140**	
Commitment to professional development	4	0.613	4	0.583	2.982**	
Able to deal with complexity	4	0.350	4	0.499	1.806	
Listening	4	0.531	4	0.561	3.071**	
Negotiation	4	0.514	4	0.637	3.106**	
Workplace experience	4	0.628	4	0.716	2.077*	
Right personality	4	0.395	4	0.499	1.508	
Resource management	4	0.49	4	0.480	2.972**	
Risk analysis	4	0.824	4	1.026	2.372**	
Computer technology competence	4	0.499	4	0.316	0.905	
Customer orientation	4	0.699	4	0.613	2.138*	
Accounting software	4	1.183	4	0.912	2.309*	
Key accounting/book keeping	4	1.606	4	1.449	0.250	
Smart appearance	4	1.146	4	0.695	0.479	
Research	3	0.880	3	0.649	1.387	

**Notes:** Gap between importance of generic skills to career success of graduates and graduates' achievement of generic skills: employers' perception. Scale: 1 = no priority, 5 = top priority. \*, \*\*Significant at 0.05 and 0.01 per cent level, respectively

**Table I.**  
Expectation-performance gap



The absolute comparison of the median scores of “importance of the skill to career success of graduates” and “graduates” achievement of skill’ reveals that many of the skills tested in this study are not achieved by accounting graduates at the level expected by employers. Among them, significant gaps were identified for many skills. They are: work ethics, attitudes and values; dedication, self-motivation and meeting tight deadlines; intellectual; decision making; leadership; problem solving; oral communication in English; critical thinking; written communication in English; commitment to professional development; listening; negotiation and resource management. However, employers are satisfied with accounting graduates’ skills relating to achieving given targets by the management, able to deal with complexity, right personality, computer technology competence, key accounting/book keeping and smart appearance and research skills. This result confirms that a considerable expectation-performance gap exists, in terms of generic skills of accounting graduates, from the employer perspective.

Although the results are consistent with the evidence of New Zealand (Bui and Porter, 2010; Wells *et al.*, 2009) and Australian studies (Tempone and Martin, 2003; Kavanagh and Drennan, 2008; Jackling and De Lange, 2009), they are not unexpected given the context in Sri Lanka. For example, our previous research regarding generic skills revealed final year accounting undergraduates perceive that the majority of generic skills that are important to their careers are not adequately developed during the degree (Abayadeera and Watty, 2011). Further, students’ busyness in pursuing academic qualifications simultaneously with professional qualifications and the heavy academic curricular which over-emphasises the technical skill development hinder their creativity and generic skill development. In addition, the Sri Lankan secondary education system provides very limited opportunity for students to acquire generic skills as students are compelled to prepare for the extremely competitive GCE (A/L) examination:

*RQ2.* What is the gap between the perceptions of employers and university educators regarding the importance of generic skills to career success of graduates (expectation gap)?

*RQ2* inquires about the expectation differences between university educators and employers in relation to generic skills that are important to the career success of graduates. University educators play a key role in equipping graduates with the generic skills required in the employment market. Therefore it is important to enquire about university educators’ perceptions in terms of generic skills that are important for the career success of graduates, in addition to those of employers.

Table II presents the median scores of university educators’ and employers’ perceptions about “importance of the skill to career success of graduates” and the perception differences (expectation gap).

The absolute comparison of median scores reveals that university educators place more importance on almost all skills tested in this study than those of employers. In particular, significant differences were reported for: written communication in English, workplace experience, right personality and research skills. For these skills, the university educators’ perception of the importance of the skill to the career success was higher than that expressed by employers.

The above results revealed that the university educators are aware of the employer expectations of graduate accountants, in terms of generic skills. This is not a surprise,

Skill list	Employers' perception (n = 31)		Importance of the skill to career success of graduates		University educators' perception (n = 19)		Expectation gap z value
	Median	Variance	Median	Variance	Median	Variance	
Work ethics, attitudes and values	5	0.265	5	0.368	5	0.368	1.072
Dedication, self-motivation and meeting tight deadlines	5	0.368	4	0.538	4	0.538	2.138*
Achieve given targets by the management	5	0.452	4	0.468	4	0.468	1.264
Intellectual	5	0.256	5	0.205	5	0.205	1.319
Decision making	5	0.323	5	0.256	5	0.205	1.160
Leadership	5	0.256	5	0.257	5	0.257	0.209
Problem solving	5	0.525	5	0.339	5	0.339	1.067
Oral communication in English	5	0.389	5	0.246	5	0.246	0.940
Interpersonal team work	5	0.456	5	0.246	5	0.246	0.803
Critical thinking	4	0.378	5	0.183	5	0.183	2.267*
Written communication in English	4	0.426	5	0.175	5	0.175	2.620**
Commitment to professional development	4	0.613	5	0.205	5	0.205	2.130*
Able to deal with complexity	4	0.350	4	0.427	4	0.427	0.12
Listening	4	0.531	5	0.246	5	0.246	1.776
Negotiation	4	0.514	4	0.263	4	0.263	1.118
Workplace experience	4	0.628	5	0.339	5	0.339	2.362**
Right personality	4	0.395	5	0.357	5	0.357	2.724**
Resource management	4	0.490	4	0.427	4	0.427	0.782
Risk analysis	4	0.824	4	0.544	4	0.544	0.282
Computer technology competence	4	0.499	4	0.357	4	0.357	1.990*
Customer orientation	4	0.699	4	0.433	4	0.433	0.330
Accounting software	4	1.163	4	0.471	4	0.471	1.427
Key accounting/book keeping	4	1.606	5	1.140	5	1.140	0.831
Smart appearance	4	1.146	5	0.690	5	0.690	2.233*
Research	3	0.880	4	0.918	4	0.918	2.535**

**Notes:** Expectation of university educators and employers: importance of generic skills to career success of graduates. Scale: 1 = no priority, 5 = top priority.  
 \*, \*\* Significant at 0.05 and 0.01 per cent level, respectively

**Table II.**  
The expectation gap

given the context of the degree programme considered in this study. According to the Head of the Department, this accounting degree programme has been designed to develop competent accounting graduates who would satisfy the requirements of the employment market. Further, this degree programme provides intense practical experience for undergraduates during the years 3 and 4:

*RQ3.* What is the gap between university educators' perception regarding the importance of generic skills to career success of graduates and their self-confidence in teaching generic skills (constraint gap)?

The objective of *RQ3* is to find the contributory causes for the skill deficiency found in *RQ1*. It is important to know more about the capacity of university educators to teach and assess generic skills in accounting education, given that they attribute high importance to the generic skills of graduates' for career success. Table III presents the university educators' perceptions about "importance of the skill to career success of graduates", "university educators" self-confidence in skills teaching' and the difference between "importance" and "self-confidence" (constraint gap).

The absolute comparison of median scores reveals that university educators have low confidence in teaching many generic skills required in the employment market. In particular, university educators acknowledge their low confidence in teaching critical thinking, commitment to professional development, problem solving, workplace experience, interpersonal team work, listening, right personality, achieve given targets by the management, computer technology competence, accounting software and resource management and customer orientation.

Although university educators acknowledged their low confidence in teaching the above skills, our previous study revealed that final year undergraduates believe interpersonal team work skills and computer technology competence were adequately developed during the degree (Abayadeera and Watty, 2011). Students in the degree programme used in this study may have acquired these skills via the practical experience component of the degree and extra-curricula activities in the university.

Responses to an open-ended question which asked, "what is your role in developing the generic skills of undergraduates?" were analysed with a view to finding the reasons for the constraint gap. Ten of 19 respondents answered the open-ended question. Eight respondents acknowledged that they have a role to play in facilitating students to develop generic skills via the practical experience component; extra-curricula activities and in-class activities of the degree programme. This implies that the majority of educators in Sri Lanka are not explicitly willing to accept the responsibility of skills teaching in the university. However, two educators insisted on the need to embed the generic skills development activities in the curricula and to systematically assess them.

These results may reflect the thinking of traditional university educators in Sri Lanka and perhaps more broadly, that students' skills development is not the responsibility of discipline educators, compared to the development of intellectual capabilities (Polster, 2000; Craig and Amernic, 2002; Bui and Porter, 2010). Further, Sri Lankan university educators' low level of motivation may be cause for this scenario. In addition, this finding can be considered in light of university reward systems for promotion and tenure policies across the globe that reward research outcomes more

Skill list	Importance of the skill to career success of graduates: university educators' perception (n = 19)		University educators' self-confidence in skills teaching (n = 19)		Constraint gap z value
	Median	Variance	Median	Variance	
Written communication in English	5	0.175	4	0.368	2.333*
Critical thinking	5	0.183	4	0.333	3.116**
Commitment to professional development	5	0.205	4	0.211	3.464**
Intellectual	5	0.205	4	0.357	2.333*
Decision making	5	0.205	4	0.357	1.941*
Problem solving	5	0.339	4	0.433	2.668**
Workplace experience	5	0.339	4	1.339	2.745**
Interpersonal team work	5	0.246	4	0.433	2.500**
Listening	5	0.246	4	0.509	2.530**
Oral communication in English	5	0.246	4	0.427	2.333*
Right personality	5	0.357	4	0.398	3.398**
Leadership	5	0.257	4	0.544	2.179*
Work ethics, attitudes and values	5	0.368	5	0.374	0.264
Smart appearance	5	0.690	4	0.585	0.849
Key accounting/book keeping	5	1.140	5	1.433	0.439
Negotiation	4	0.263	4	0.497	2.309*
Achieve given targets by the management	4	0.468	4	0.480	3.260**
Computer technology competence	4	0.357	4	1.485	2.521**
Accounting software	4	0.471	4	1.912	2.458**
Able to deal with complexity	4	0.427	4	0.275	1.613
Resource management	4	0.427	4	0.228	2.598**
Dedication, self-motivation and meeting tight deadlines	4	0.538	4	0.585	0.707
Risk analysis	4	0.544	4	0.912	1.563
Customer orientation	4	0.433	4	0.480	2.565**
Research	4	0.918	4	0.731	0.914

**Notes:** The gap between university educators' perception of importance of generic skills to career success of graduates and their self-confidence in generic skills teaching. Scale: 1 = no priority, 5 = top priority. \*, \*\*Significant at 0.05 and 0.01 per cent level, respectively

**Table III.**  
Constraint gap

than they do effective learning outcomes. For this reason, many academics believe that a focus on research is a better prospect for career progression in academia (Serow, 2000; Bui and Porter, 2010; Barrett and Milbourne, 2012):

*RQ4.* What is the gap between employers' perception of graduates' achievement of generic skills and university educators' self-confidence in teaching generic skills (performance gap)?

The final research question compares graduates' achievement in skills (employers' perceptions) and university educators' self-confidence in skills teaching, with a view to assess the performance of skills teaching of university educators. Table IV presents the median scores of employers' perception of graduates' achievement of skills; university educators' self-confidence in skills teaching and the performance gap.

The median differences are not significant in almost all cases revealing the high standards of performance of the university educators. In other words, skills that are confidently taught in the degree programme were successfully achieved by graduates. However, graduates failed to demonstrate the written communication skills in English and research skills even though they were confidently taught during the degree. The employer satisfaction regarding "achieve given targets by the management" (results of *RQ1* in Table I) indicates that this skill is achieved by graduates although it may not be well taught in-class.

Findings of *RQ4* reflect the importance of expanding the accounting curricula by embedding and assessing generic skill development activities. The heavy content of standardised curricula hinders students' creativity and their generic skills development. In addition, it is vital to develop the capacities of university educators in terms of teaching and assessing generic skills in accounting degree programmes. Academic staff development programmes should be designed to expand the university educators' horizons, change their perspectives and cultivate a positive disposition towards the emerging suite of generic skills needed by accounting graduates. University educators should be mindful of the importance of comprehensive and coherent curricula that maps out the courses, experiences and activities aimed at preparing skilful accounting graduates to become business leaders in an increasingly competitive global work environment.

## 5. Conclusion

Generic skills development among accounting graduates is a vital factor for career success in the global work environment. This study aims to identify the gaps in generic skills by comparing the importance of generic skills to the career success of graduates and graduates' achievement of generic skills, from the perspectives of university educators and employers in Sri Lanka. Considering the contextual differences, we adapt and expand Bui and Porter's (2010) expectation-performance gap framework to identify the components of the expectation-performance gap in generic skills of accounting graduates. We further analysed the expectation-performance gap in generic skills to: the expectation gap, the constraint gap and the performance gap, with a view to identifying the contributory causes for the generic skill deficiencies of accounting graduates. The data collected by questionnaire surveys was analysed for non-parametric tests: the Wilcoxon signed-rank test and the Mann-Whitney test, using SPSS version 20.

Skill list	Graduates' achievement of skill: employers' perception (n = 31)		University educators' self-confidence in skills teaching (n = 19)		Performance gap z value
	Median	Variance	Median	Variance	
Work ethics, attitudes and values	4	0.695	5	0.374	0.171
Dedication, self-motivation and meeting tight deadlines	4	0.606	1	0.585	0.931
Achieve given targets by the management	4	0.426	4	0.480	0.001**
Intellectual	4	0.632	4	0.357	0.059*
Decision making	4	0.366	4	0.357	0.027*
Leadership	4	0.357	4	0.544	0.760
Problem solving	4	0.514	4	0.433	0.116
Oral communication in English	4	0.892	4	0.427	0.027*
Interpersonal team work	4	0.540	4	0.433	0.743
Critical thinking	4	0.490	4	0.333	0.588
Written communication in English	4	0.598	4	0.368	0.003**
Commitment to professional development	4	0.583	4	0.211	0.297
Able to deal with complexity	4	0.499	4	0.275	0.936
Listening	4	0.561	4	0.509	0.070
Negotiation	4	0.637	4	0.497	0.069
Workplace experience	4	0.716	4	1.339	0.745
Right personality	4	0.499	4	0.398	0.382
Resource management	4	0.480	4	0.228	0.908
Risk analysis	4	1.026	4	0.912	0.958
Computer technology competence	4	0.316	4	1.485	0.360
Customer orientation	4	0.613	4	0.480	0.210
Accounting software	4	0.912	4	1.912	0.664
Key accounting/book keeping	4	1.449	5	1.433	0.386
Smart appearance	4	0.695	4	0.585	0.149
Research	3	0.649	4	0.731	0.000**

**Notes:** The gap between the graduates' achievement of skills (employers' perception) and university educators' self-confidence in skills teaching. Scale: 1 = no priority, 5 = top priority. \*\*Significant at 0.05 and 0.01 per cent level, respectively

**Table IV.**  
Performance gap

This research found an expectation-performance gap in generic skills in accounting education in Sri Lanka. Although the university educators are aware of employer expectations of graduate accountants, university educators acknowledged their low confidence in teaching many generic skills. This important finding aligns to Bui and Porter (2010) who also found that accounting educators' substandard teaching contributes to the expectation-performance gap. Potentially, the university educators' deficient teaching may result in unsatisfactory educational outcomes of accounting graduates in Sri Lanka.

Importantly the current study provides unique evidence from university educators that there are some generic skills that they do not feel confident in teaching or assessing. Further, many do not see it as their responsibility to do so. However, the skills that are confidently taught by educators during the degree were successfully achieved by graduates, suggesting the importance of expanding the accounting curricula and systematic staff development programmes to improve the capabilities of academic staff in teaching and assessing generic skills.

The findings of this paper assist in developing a better understanding of the contributory causes of the expectation-performance gap in accounting education, in terms of generic skills. University educators should consider curriculum reforms that aim to develop a comprehensive and coherent curriculum that maps out the courses, experiences and activities aimed at preparing skilful and globally competitive accounting graduates. Further, it is important to consider and explore the value of adopting internationally benchmarked curriculum standards, borrowing educational practices from developed countries such as the UK, the USA and Australia and emulating educational policies from internationally top performing countries. The current educational practices, policies and priorities in Sri Lanka are the major obstacles to preparing globally competent accounting graduates. These cultural changes take determination, time and effort.

Although this study provides important insights about generic skills that are important for career success of accounting graduates in Sri Lanka and the contributory causes as to why they may not be exhibiting these skills, the findings are limited in their scope given that only one accounting degree programme was investigated. Also the low response rate of employers may raise concerns over potential non-response bias. These limitations highlights the opportunities for further research. The views of the stakeholders of other academic accounting programmes and professional accounting bodies, with respect to generic skills that accounting graduates should possess, will contribute to better understanding the needs and explanations of key stakeholders in accounting education.

#### Notes

1. GCE (A/L): general certificate of education (advanced level).
2. GCE (A/L) Accountancy is a pre-requisite to enter a university accounting degree program.

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