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Employability Outcomes of The 13-Year Guaranteed Education Program in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

The 13-Year Guaranteed Education Program (13YGEP) in Sri Lanka offers an alternative pathway for students who do not continue to the G.C.E. Advanced Level, aiming to strengthen employability and workforce readiness. This study explores how the program supports graduates' transition from school to employment, focusing on skill development, industry exposure, and implementation challenges.

A qualitative approach was used to gather insights from key stakeholders. Data were collected from 30 graduates who completed the full program, including industrial training, as well as teachers, school principals, education administrators, and vocational education resource personnel in the Western Province in Sri Lanka. Open-ended questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis captured participants' experiences and perspectives. Findings show that most graduates secured employment in the private sector, engaged in self-employment, pursued overseas work, or continued further education. Practical training, workplace exposure, and soft skills particularly communication, teamwork, and problem-solving were critical for employability. Government-supported financial assistance was especially helpful for graduates pursuing self-employment. Challenges included limited technical resources, uneven industry placements, and variations in program implementation. The study concludes that the 13YGEP significantly enhances employability among school leavers, highlighting the importance of stronger industry collaboration, improved resources, and ongoing teacher development for sustainable outcomes.

KEYWORDS

13-Year Guaranteed Education Program; employability; vocational education; youth employment; Sri Lanka

Introduction

Education in Sri Lanka has evolved through multiple phases, reflecting social, cultural, and economic priorities over time. Traditional systems, such as the 'Pirivena', integrated academic learning with moral values and practical knowledge. During the colonial period, educational priorities shifted towards literacy, English proficiency, and administrative skills, which gradually weakened the connection between education and local labor market needs. Vocational education emerged as a response to this gap, providing learners with practical skills necessary for economic participation. However, vocational education has often been undervalued, leading to low participation rates and concerns about curriculum relevance. The 13-Year Guaranteed Education Program (13YGEP) was introduced in 2017 to ensure uninterrupted education beyond the G.C.E. Ordinary Level (O/L) examination while developing vocational, technical, and entrepreneurial skills aligned with labor market demands. The program combines general education subjects with vocational courses and institutional training, emphasizing hands-on learning and exposure to workplace environments. Evaluating the program's

Table 1. Unemployment as a Percentage of the Labor Force by Age Group

Age Group	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
15-19	18.8	21.4	24.1	27.1	21.0	26.5	26.0	31.7	25.1	27.9	29.5	27.7

Sourch : Sri Lanka Economic and Social Statistics, (2025)

Table 2. Unemployment by Education Level as a Percentage of the Labor Force

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Grade 6-10	3.4	3.4	3.4	3.3	2.8	2.9	3.3	4.0	3.4	3.4	3.4	2.8
G.C.E. O/L	6.0	5.9	6.4	5.8	5.9	5.2	6.5	7.2	7.1	6.2	6.0	5.7

Sourch : Economic and Social Statistics of Sri Lanka, (2025)

effectiveness in improving employability is important given the persistent youth unemployment challenges and changing labor market needs in Sri Lanka. Students who do not pursue higher education after the Ordinary Level Examination often enter the labor market without adequate skills, contributing to youth unemployment. (See Table 1).

As shown in Tables 1, unemployment rates among the 15-19 age group fluctuated between 2013 and 2024. Table 1 indicates that youth unemployment remained high over the years, rising from 18.8% in 2013 to peaks above 30%.

When considering unemployment by education level, Table 2 reveal that individuals with Grades 6-10 maintained relatively low and stable unemployment rates of 2.8-4%, while G.C.E. O/L holders experienced fluctuations between 5.2% and 7.2%, declining to 5.7% in 2024. This trend has intensified competition for employment, further marginalizing those without higher qualifications or specialized skills. In this context, the need for alternative educational pathways that bridge the gap between schooling and employment becomes increasingly important.

The 13YGEP provides vocational education that equips students with practical, job-oriented skills and a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) Level 4 certification. This program offers a structured pathway for entering both local and international labor markets, reducing the risk of unemployment among school leavers. By developing technical competencies, soft skills, and entrepreneurial abilities, the 13YGEP contributes to the creation of a skilled workforce and supports the broader economic development of Sri Lanka.

Based on these data, it is evident that a significant proportion of school leavers face employment challenges. Introducing and promoting programs such as the 13YGEP within the school system represents a strategic approach to enhancing human capital and addressing youth unemployment. The integration of vocational training into secondary education can facilitate smoother transitions from school to work, improve employability outcomes, and ultimately support sustainable economic growth.

Research Problem

Although participation in secondary education has improved, many students discontinue formal education after the O/L examination, and youth unemployment remains high. The 13YGEP was designed to address this issue by equipping students with employable skills.

Existing discussions on vocational education in Sri Lanka often highlight its potential to enhance employability by equipping learners with practical and job-relevant skills.

However, there is comparatively limited empirical research that critically evaluates the outcomes of recent policy initiatives such as the 13YGEP. In particular, there is a lack of in-depth, stakeholder-based evidence that captures the experiences of graduates, educators, and administrators involved in the program.

Research Objectives

The study aims to provide a comprehensive examination of the 13YGEP in Sri Lanka, with a particular focus on its role in enhancing employability. The research objectives are designed to address multiple aspects of the program, including stakeholders’ perceptions, the relevance of the skills developed, the impact of industry partnerships and internships, the role of government policies, and the challenges faced by students in transitioning to the workforce. Together, these objectives provide a structured framework to understand how effectively the 13YGEP prepares students for productive participation in the labor market.

The research objectives are to:

1. Examine the perceptions of students, teachers, and administrators regarding the 13YGEP’s effectiveness in enhancing employability.
2. Assess the alignment between skills developed through the program and labor market requirements.
3. Explore the impact of industry partnerships and internships on employability.
4. Analyze the role of government policies and initiatives in supporting employability.
5. Identify challenges faced by graduates in transitioning from education to employment

Methods

Research Design

A qualitative research design was adopted to gain a detailed understanding of stakeholder experiences with the 13YGEP. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate as the study aims to explore participants’ experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of the program rather than relying solely on quantitative indicators.

Employability is a multidimensional construct that encompasses technical competencies, soft skills and contextual influences. Therefore, a qualitative design enables a more in-depth and context-sensitive understanding of how the program operates in practice and how its outcomes are experienced by different stakeholders. The study follows an exploratory and

descriptive orientation, allowing for the identification of both expected outcomes and emerging issues related to program implementation.

This approach also facilitates a critical examination of variations in program delivery and outcomes, which may not be adequately captured through purely statistical methods. By focusing on lived experiences and stakeholder perspectives, the study aims to generate a nuanced understanding of the relationship between vocational education and employability.

Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to select participants who could provide rich insights. The sample included 30 graduates from the Western Province in Sri Lanka, 10 teachers, 5 principals, the Director of Education, the provincial 13YGEP coordinator, and resource personnel from the National Institute of Education, the Educational Zonal Office, and a vocational institute (Table 3).

Research Location

The study was conducted in the Western Province of Sri Lanka, covering the districts of Colombo, Gampaha, and Kalutara. Although 13YGEP is implemented nationwide, this study focused on the Western Province, where program schools are highly concentrated and industrial and institutional resources are more accessible. Consequently, the findings primarily reflect the Western Province context including infrastructure, industry connections, and labor market conditions and may not fully generalize to less-resourced provinces. Future research could include schools from other provinces to examine whether similar patterns emerge in less-resourced settings.

Data Collection

Data were collected using open-ended questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Open-ended questionnaires captured general perceptions, while interviews provided in-depth insights into program implementation, industry exposure, and policy support. Document analysis of policy reports and curriculum guidelines provided contextual understanding. Instruments were piloted to ensure clarity and relevance.

During data collection, the researcher faced practical challenges due to the absence of official records on student completion and progression within the 13YGEP after the theoretical component. Schools do not maintain students' records once they transfer to vocational institution to complete vocational education, limiting access to comprehensive graduate data. To address this, the researcher recruited a purposive sample of 30 graduates who had completed the program and obtained an NVQ Level 4 certificate, ensuring all participants had verifiable program completion. Additionally, arranging interviews with academic administrators and education officials was difficult due to their busy schedules, extending the data collection timeline.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis which identifies recurring themes and patterns. Themes included employability outcomes, skill alignment, industry exposure, government support, and challenges in workforce transition. This method enabled systematic interpretation while preserving participants' nuanced experiences.

Ethical Approval

This study adhered to established ethical standards to

ensure integrity and protect participants. All participants were informed about the purpose and procedures of the study, and participation was voluntary, with consent obtained prior to data collection. Participants' privacy was safeguarded by anonymizing all data and excluding identifying information from reports. Data were securely stored and accessed only by the researcher, and used solely for academic purposes. Ethical approval and necessary permissions were obtained from relevant educational authorities and institutions. All secondary sources were appropriately acknowledged in accordance with APA (7th edition) guidelines.

Table 3. Participant Distribution

Participant Group	Number of Participants
Students (Western Province)	30
Teachers	10
Principals	5
Director of Education	1
Provincial 13YGEP Coordinator	1
NIE Resource Person	1
Zonal Office Resource	1
Vocational Institute Resource	1

Result and Discussion

Participant Demographics and Employment Outcomes

The study involved 30 students who had completed the full 13YGEP, including industrial training. Of these, 18 were male and 12 were female. Employment outcomes were classified into five mutually exclusive categories: employed locally, employed overseas, self-employed, unemployed, and further study. 13 were self-employed, 9 were employed in the local private sector, 7 were employed overseas, and 1 was pursuing further education. Participants represented vocational courses such as Food Processing Studies, Child Psychology, Arts and Crafts, Fashion and Graphic Design, Tourism and Hospitality, Computer Hardware & Networking, Aluminum and Metal Fabrication, Textile and Apparel, Electrical and Electronic Studies, Automobile Studies, and Event Management. According to the data, participants reported that the program contributed to their employment across multiple sectors, including entrepreneurship and international placements. This suggests that graduates perceived 13YGEP as supporting their preparedness for diverse career pathways.

Program Effectiveness and Skill Development

Students overwhelmingly perceived the 13YGEP as effective in preparing them for employment, citing both academic and practical components as central to their readiness. Key skills identified included teamwork, communication, problem-solving, and technical proficiency, all of which are highly valued by employers. One student remarked, "The 13YGEP is very effective because it helps us gain both academic and practical skills needed for future jobs," while another noted, "It gives us real-life experiences and helps us understand what workplaces expect." Several participants emphasized confidence building as a critical outcome, stating, "It really prepares us well for employment by improving our confidence and professional behavior," and "I feel confident about finding a job after completing 13YGEP because it focuses on employability skills."

Teachers and administrators similarly reported that the 13YGEP effectively prepares students for employment, highlighting practical learning experiences as a core strength. Many noted that the program equips students with skills directly applicable in workplace settings and fosters early career orientation, encouraging students to explore potential career paths before leaving school. As one respondent explained, "It's an effective initiative because it encourages students to think about career paths early and equips them with employable skills before leaving school."

The program's impact is further reflected in post-graduation outcomes. Female students frequently leverage vocational skills to establish small businesses in areas such as food manufacturing, arts and crafts, and fashion design. One participant observed, "Completion of NVQ Level 4 enables students to access government loans at low interest rates, which supports entrepreneurial initiatives and small business development." Male students, in contrast, often pursue specialized technical careers or overseas employment, particularly in fields such as Aluminum Fabrication Technology, Metal Work, Electrical and Electronic Technology, or Motor Mechanical Technology.

A number of participants reported securing employment in sectors related to their vocational training, particularly in technical and service-oriented fields. This alignment between training and employment reflects a degree of curriculum relevance. However, this alignment was not consistent across all participants. Some graduates indicated that they accepted employment outside their trained fields due to limited opportunities, personal circumstances, or labor market constraints. This suggests that while the program supports access to employment, it does not necessarily guarantee optimal job matching.

Furthermore, although the majority of participants were engaged in some form of employment or economic activity, these outcomes primarily reflect short-term transitions. There is limited evidence regarding job stability, income levels, or long-term career progression. Therefore, while the program appears to facilitate entry into employment, its effectiveness in ensuring sustainable and quality employment remains uncertain.

These findings are consistent with previous studies on vocational education, which indicate that such programs can improve access to employment but may not always ensure long-term career stability or job satisfaction. Accordingly, the employment outcomes associated with the 13YGEP should be interpreted as indicative of access rather than definitive evidence of sustained employability.

Alignment with Labor Market Needs

The 13YGEP places strong emphasis on equipping students with skills that are relevant to the modern labor market. The development of soft skills such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and time management was frequently highlighted. These skills were perceived to enhance confidence and readiness for workplace environments, particularly during the transition from school to employment. One participant remarked, "The skills I gained in teamwork and communication really help me in my current job," while another added "The industrial training sessions helped me understand workplace operations and gave me hands on experience, which is highly appreciated by my employer." These responses align with research suggesting that programs integrating vocational and practical learning enhance employability by providing students with skills that meet employer expectations.

In addition to technical and soft skills, the program also

strengthens entrepreneurial competencies and financial literacy. Students reported gaining confidence in managing small businesses, budgeting, and understanding basic financial principles. One respondent shared, "I learned how to plan budgets and manage small scale projects, which is very useful for my self-employment," while another emphasized, "The program teaches skills that are essential if you want to start your own business, not just work for someone else." This reflects the program's success in promoting economic self-sufficiency and supporting the development of entrepreneurship as a viable career pathway.

However, the extent of skill development was not uniform across all participants. Variations in teaching quality, access to equipment, and institutional support influenced the depth and effectiveness of learning experiences. Some participants reported limited opportunities to actively practice or apply their skills, indicating a gap between intended learning outcomes and actual implementation. While prior literature emphasizes the role of soft skills in improving employability, the findings of this study suggest that their development within the 13YGEP remains somewhat inconsistent. This highlights the need for a more structured and systematic integration of soft skills within the curriculum to ensure that all students benefit equally.

Industry Partnerships and Internships

Industry partnerships and structured internships are central to the 13YGEP, providing students with practical experience and exposure to real-world work environments. Student feedback indicates that these components significantly enhance employability by bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. One participant noted, "The industrial training was the most valuable part of the program because it allowed me to experience a real work environment and understand employer expectations." Another stated, "Through my internship, I gained hands on experience in food manufacturing technology, which made it easier to transition into my current job."

Structured internships and formal partnerships with the Vocational Training Authority (VTA), the National Apprentice and Industrial Training Authority (NAITA), and the Tertiary and Vocational Education Commission (TVEC) were central to the 13YGEP in enhancing student employability. Within this model, the VTA facilitated access to nationally certified technical training programs, NAITA coordinated apprenticeships and industrial placements across key sectors, and TVEC ensured that all vocational curricula and assessments adhered to national quality standards. The partnerships operated through a systematic mechanism: students were selected for placements based on their academic performance and career aspirations, host organizations appointed trained mentors to supervise and guide them, and student progress was assessed using evaluation tools aligned with industry competency standards. By linking classroom-based theoretical knowledge with structured, real-world workplace experiences, the program enabled students to acquire practical skills, professional behaviors, and workplace readiness, thereby strengthening their capacity to meet industry expectations and improve long-term employability outcomes.

While the majority of students found internships beneficial, a few suggested improvements. One student remarked, "The duration of some industrial training sessions was short, and longer placements could provide more practical experience," and another noted, "More structured mentorship during internships would help students gain

deeper insights and skills." These inconsistencies suggest that the impact of industrial training depends heavily on the strength of industry partnerships and the level of coordination between educational institutions and employers.

Government Support

Government policies and initiatives play a central role in supporting the 13YGEP by providing infrastructure, funding, and a regulatory framework necessary for its success. Students' feedback indicates that these measures positively influence both their educational experience and employability outcomes. One student stated, "The program is supported by the government, which ensures that we have access to modern labs and equipment for our practical training." Another added, "Government backing makes it possible for us to attend industrial training programs without additional costs, which is very helpful." Students also highlighted the importance of government allowances in facilitating participation. A participant noted, "Financial support from the government encouraged me to complete the program fully, including the industrial training".

While the government has made efforts to provide modern equipment and learning materials across 13YGEP schools, students frequently reported disparities in access, reflecting uneven resourcing across schools, areas, and program modules. Some schools, particularly in urban or better-funded areas, were well-equipped with up-to-date tools and resources, whereas others, especially in rural or under-resourced areas, lacked essential equipment. The disparity was further compounded by the nature of certain modules, learning materials for some technical or specialized subjects were expensive and limited, resulting in occasional shortages, while other modules required less costly materials and were generally accessible. These findings suggest that, despite national-level provision, unequal distribution of resources remains a significant challenge, impacting students' opportunities to engage fully with practical components of the curriculum.

Low-interest government loans were highlighted as particularly important for supporting female graduates in entrepreneurial ventures. As one participant explained, "Completion of NVQ Level 4 enables students to access government loans at low interest rates, which supports entrepreneurial initiatives and small business development." These initiatives encourage graduates to pursue self-employment and small business creation, particularly in fields such as fashion design, food manufacturing, and beauty services.

However, the sustainability of these entrepreneurial activities remains uncertain. Participants identified several challenges, including limited access to capital, lack of market linkages, and insufficient ongoing support. These factors constrain the growth and long-term viability of self-employment ventures.

These findings align with broader research on youth entrepreneurship, which emphasizes that training alone is insufficient without continued institutional and financial support. Therefore, while the program promotes entrepreneurial skills, its effectiveness in sustaining self-employment outcomes depends on broader support mechanisms.

Challenges

Although the 13YGEP has demonstrated considerable effectiveness, several challenges affect its implementation. Limited access to modern equipment and technology was frequently reported by students. One respondent stated, "Limited access to modern equipment

and resources makes it difficult to provide up to date practical training." Additionally, the variation in students' foundational skills and motivation levels impacts program outcomes. Participants noted, "Some students lack foundational skills, such as basic literacy or numeracy, which affects their employability readiness," and "Ensuring all students actively engage in hands on learning activities is sometimes difficult due to varying motivation levels."

Time constraints and limited industry partnerships further restrict practical learning. Respondents highlighted, "Balancing the curriculum between academic knowledge and practical skill development can be challenging," and "Limited industry partnerships reduce opportunities for internships, job shadowing, and real-world exposure." Socioeconomic factors were also noted as barriers, as some students face financial constraints that limit participation in additional skill development activities or entrepreneurial projects.

One respondent remarked, "One major challenge is the lack of proper facilities and equipment in some schools, which limits the practical training part of the program." Finding sufficient and suitable internship placements, particularly in rural areas, was another challenge, as noted: "Finding enough suitable internship placements for all students has been quite difficult, especially in rural areas."

Teacher preparedness was also identified as a concern, with some instructors lacking sufficient training to deliver the new curriculum effectively. Additional challenges included variations in program implementation across schools, limited resources, and insufficient monitoring mechanisms. These observations reflect broader trends in vocational education globally, where access to resources, qualified instructors, and equitable industry placements are critical for achieving positive outcomes.

Interpretation of Key Findings

The study involved 30 students who completed the full 13YGEP including industrial training, with 18 males and 12 females. 13 were self-employed, 9 were employed in the local private sector, 7 were employed overseas, and 1 was pursuing further education. This distribution suggests that the program effectively supports students in accessing a range of career pathways, from entrepreneurship to international placements.

Students reported that the 13YGEP prepared them well for employment, emphasizing both academic knowledge and practical experience. Key skills identified included teamwork, communication, problem-solving, technical proficiency, entrepreneurial abilities, and financial literacy. Female students frequently used vocational skills to establish small businesses, aided by government loans accessible through NVQ Level 4 certification, while male students often pursued specialized technical careers or opportunities abroad.

The program's strength lies in its alignment with labor market needs, combining technical, financial, and soft skills. Structured internships and partnerships with organizations such as VTA, NAITA, and TVEC were particularly valued, providing hands-on experience that bridged classroom learning with workplace demands. While most students found these opportunities beneficial, some suggested extending industrial training duration and providing more structured mentorship to enhance practical learning.

A few areas for improvement were highlighted. Some students felt that certain technical modules could be more comprehensive, incorporating industry-standard tools and techniques to better prepare them for specialized roles. Implementation challenges were also noted, including limited access to modern equipment, inadequate facilities in some schools, variations in program delivery, and gaps in

teacher preparedness. These factors occasionally constrained the practical aspects of the program.

Government policies and initiatives were identified as crucial for the program's success, providing funding, infrastructure, curriculum guidance, and regulatory oversight. Such support ensures that the skills developed remain relevant to the labor market and enhances both program access and quality. Addressing the identified challenges while maintaining responsive policy support will be key to sustaining and improving the effectiveness of the 13YGEP.

Comparison with Previous Studies

The findings of this study both align with and diverge from the extant literature on vocational and technical education, offering contextually grounded insights into the effectiveness and challenges of the 13YGEP in Sri Lanka. Research across global and South Asian contexts underscores that employability outcomes are shaped by multiple factors, including program design, institutional capacity, labor market structures, and socio economic conditions (Ahmad et al., 2021; King & Palmer, 2010; Tilak, 2002). A central convergence with the wider literature is the demonstrated importance of structured work integrated learning (WIL) and formal industry partnerships in enhancing employability. In this study, participants frequently valued hands on experience and workplace exposure, which aligns with global evidence that internships, apprenticeships, and workplace based learning significantly improve technical competencies, soft skills, and job readiness (Fleming & Eames, 2022; Mabungela & Mtiki, 2024; Rohanai et al., 2025; Smith et al., 2019). Parallel research in South Asia further indicates that WIL supports smoother school to work transitions, particularly in economies where informal employment is significant and formal pathways are limited (Dhar & Jain, 2020; Mehrotra et al., 2014; Singh & Kaur, 2021).

Within the Sri Lankan context, national studies of TVET and NVQ pathways emphasize that competency based frameworks coupled with real world learning enhance youth adaptability and labor market relevance (Fernando & Perera, 2019). This study's findings resonate with that scholarship, highlighting that industry linkages, mentorship, and competency assessments strengthened students' employability by bridging theoretical knowledge with practical application. Consistent with research in Nepal and Bangladesh, structured apprenticeships contribute to improved workplace confidence and professional behaviors (Islam & Sultan, 2022; Ministry of Education Sri Lanka, 2017).

However, a notable divergence arises in relation to resource availability and technical infrastructure. Although many international TVET systems operate with relatively consistent access to modern equipment and industry standard facilities (OECD, 2021; UNESCO, 2020), participants in the 13YGEP reported uneven access to up to date tools and technology. This finding reflects broader evidence that institutional disparities and resource constraints significantly affect learning outcomes and skill acquisition in developing contexts (Aturupane et al., 2014; Jones et al., 2018). Studies in India and Pakistan similarly document that disparities in lab equipment and technical infrastructure weaken the capacity of vocational programs to deliver practical skill development (Khan & Iqbal, 2021; Raza & Ahmed, 2020). Within Sri Lanka, resource inequities including limited access to modern workshops and variable instructional facilities have been shown to negatively influence students' perceptions of vocational pathways (Amarathunga, 2022).

Teacher preparedness emerged as both convergence

and divergence when compared with wider scholarship. Global research establishes a strong link between instructor competence, pedagogical expertise, and effective TVET delivery (Dean, 2025; Romanova, 2022). This study found inconsistencies in teacher readiness and limited exposure to industry practices, mirroring Sri Lankan research that highlights shortages of qualified instructors and gaps in professional development for vocational trainers (Perera & Silva, 2023; Wijesundara, 2021). Similar patterns have been observed in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, where weak institutional linkages and limited capacity building hinder the quality of vocational instruction (Rahman & Aziz, 2019).

Entrepreneurship development represents another area where the findings both align with and extend existing knowledge. While international literature recognizes entrepreneurship education as an important outcome of TVET programs (Ahmed et al., 2024; Makwa et al., 2025), the 13YGEP demonstrated a context specific integration of vocational training with access to financial support mechanisms that facilitated female led self employment. This finding is consistent with research in Sri Lanka and South Asia showing that entrepreneurship training and access to microcredit can help address youth unemployment in contexts where wage employment opportunities are limited (De Silva & Jayawardena, 2022; Department of Skills Development, 2025; Hussain & Riaz, 2020; Liyanage & Samarasekera, 2021).

Overall, the study confirms that the 13YGEP contributes to the development of academic, technical, and soft skills, aligning with both international best practices and regional research emphasizing the value of WIL, competency based qualifications, and work readiness. Nonetheless, disparities in infrastructure, teacher preparedness, and access to modern equipment underscore areas for improvement, contributing to a nuanced understanding of how contextual constraints mediate employability outcomes (Gamage et al., 2023). These findings reinforce the importance of viewing employability as a multidimensional outcome shaped by educational experiences, institutional contexts, and labor market dynamics rather than through program existence alone. Future research should prioritize longitudinal tracking of 13YGEP graduates and sector specific employment analyses to deepen understanding of vocational education's impact on youth employment pathways.

Limitations & Cautions

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the sample size was relatively small and limited to students who had completed the full 13YGEP, including industrial training. In addition, the sample was drawn exclusively from the Western Province of Sri Lanka. As educational resources, industry exposure, and implementation conditions vary across regions, the findings cannot be readily generalized to all students participating in the 13YGEP nationwide.

Second, the study relied primarily on self-reported data from student respondents. While participants provided detailed and reflective responses, such data may be influenced by personal perceptions, recall bias, or social desirability, which could affect objectivity. Incorporating perspectives from employers, instructors, and administrators, as well as using longitudinal employment records, would strengthen future research.

Another limitation relates to variations in program implementation across schools. Differences in infrastructure, access to modern equipment, availability of trained teachers, and quality of industry placements may have shaped students' learning experiences and employment outcomes. These contextual factors suggest that program effectiveness may differ across institutional

settings.

The study was also constrained by the limited availability of official records on student completion and post-program employment outcomes under the 13YGEP. The absence of centralized data restricted independent verification and more detailed statistical analysis.

Finally, the study focused primarily on short-term employability outcomes and did not examine long-term career progression, job stability, or income trajectories. Longitudinal studies would be required to assess the sustained impact of the 13YGEP on students' careers over time.

Despite these limitations, the study offers valuable insights into student experiences and perceived employability outcomes. The findings should therefore be interpreted as indicative rather than conclusive, providing a basis for future research and policy development.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that the 13YGEP makes a meaningful contribution to improving graduate employability by integrating academic learning with vocational training and practical exposure. Graduates developed a range of competencies aligned with labor market requirements, enabling them to pursue diverse career pathways, including private sector employment, self-employment, overseas work, and further education. Strong industry collaboration and government support emerged as key factors supporting these outcomes.

At the same time, the study identified areas that require further attention, particularly in relation to advanced technical skills, digital competencies, and access to modern learning resources. Challenges such as limited facilities, variations in program implementation, and gaps in teacher preparedness occasionally constrained the effectiveness of practical training. These findings should also be considered in light of the practical limitations faced during the research, including the absence of comprehensive official records and difficulties in arranging interviews with busy academic and administrative personnel.

Overall, the 13YGEP demonstrates the potential of structured vocational education within the secondary school system to enhance workforce readiness and support economic development in Sri Lanka. Addressing the identified challenges while maintaining responsive policy support and industry engagement will be essential to strengthening the long-term impact of the program.

Recommendations for Future Studies

Future studies on the 13YGEP should include larger and more geographically diverse samples across Sri Lanka to improve generalizability and capture regional variations in program implementation. Longitudinal research designs are recommended to assess long-term employment outcomes, including career progression, job stability, and skills utilization beyond initial employment.

Finally, future research could explore teacher professional development needs, resource availability, and the effectiveness of career guidance and entrepreneurial support mechanisms within the 13YGEP. Such studies would offer valuable evidence to inform policy development and strengthen the program's contribution to employability outcomes.

Recommendations for Improve Employability
Enhance Technical and Digital Skills:

Linked Theme: Students reported limited access to modern equipment, digital tools, and emerging technologies, especially in ICT, electronics, and mechanical streams.

Recommendation: Integrate industry-standard software, simulation tools, and digital competencies into technical and vocational curricula. Use blended learning platforms to supplement practical instruction where laboratories and resources are limited.

Expand Practical Learning Opportunities

Linked Theme: Hands-on experience was valued, but internships and project-based learning were inconsistent across schools. Recommendation: Formalize structured internships, apprenticeships, and project-based assignments. Standardize placement criteria, supervision, and assessment alignment across all schools to ensure equitable work-integrated learning experiences.

Deepen Industry Collaboration

Linked Theme: Partnerships with VTA, NAITA, TVEC, and local industries were uneven, affecting internship quality and exposure to practical skills. Recommendation: Strengthen formal collaborations with industries and vocational authorities, clearly defining roles, mentorship responsibilities, and assessment standards. Prioritize sectors and streams with the most skill shortages to maximize employability outcomes.

Teacher Professional Development

Linked Theme: Inconsistencies in teacher preparedness and limited exposure to industry practices were observed. Recommendation: Implement ongoing professional development focusing on pedagogical innovation, industry engagement, and competency-based assessment methods to enhance the quality of instruction.

Upgrade Learning Resources and Infrastructure

Linked Theme: Unequal access to laboratories, workshops, and specialized technical facilities across schools and districts. Recommendation: Strategically invest in technical facilities for streams with the most shortages. Introduce shared or mobile labs for under-resourced districts to improve equity and hands-on training opportunities.

Monitoring and Policy Support

Linked Theme: Variability in program implementation, partnership functioning, and learning outcomes. Recommendation: Develop robust evaluation mechanisms to monitor resource allocation, teacher performance, internship quality, and partnership effectiveness. Use findings to guide policy adjustments, targeted interventions, and improvements in program consistency.

Promote Entrepreneurial Skills

Linked Theme: Some female students leveraged government loans for self-employment; entrepreneurship potential was unevenly realized. Recommendation: Integrate entrepreneurship modules, financial literacy, and microcredit access into vocational streams with high self-employment potential (e.g., hospitality, ICT, small-scale manufacturing).

Soft Skills Integration

Linked Theme: Students highlighted the need for stronger communication, teamwork, and problem-solving skills. Recommendation: Embed structured soft skills development into all streams through collaborative projects, workplace simulations, and team-based activities.

Alumni Engagement

Linked Theme: Graduates lacked structured networks for mentoring and career guidance.

Recommendation: Establish formal alumni networks to support mentoring, career guidance, and professional connections, focusing on sectors with high youth unemployment.

Maintain Graduate Records

Linked Theme: Limited tracking of graduate employment outcomes impedes program evaluation. Recommendation: Systematically record and monitor graduate employment, sector placement, and further education outcomes to inform program improvements and policymaking.

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