



(RESEARCH ARTICLE)



## Academic Qualification or Experience: Which is more prominent in recruitment in Sri Lankan Non-Governmental Organizations? HR professional's perspective

Abdul Hameed Mohamed Azam\* and Sammunkutty Sithy Hamila

*Department of Accountancy, Sri Lanka Institute of Advanced Technological Education, Batticaloa, Sri Lanka.*

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### Abstract

This study explores recruitment practices in Sri Lankan non-governmental organizations (NGOs), focusing on the relative importance of academic qualifications versus work experience. NGOs in Sri Lanka play a vital role in addressing socio-economic challenges, necessitating a workforce with both theoretical and practical expertise. Using a qualitative research design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 15 Human Resource (HR) professionals from prominent NGOs in Sri Lanka. The findings reveal a clear preference for work experience in operational roles, where adaptability and problem-solving in challenging environments are critical. Conversely, academic qualifications are prioritized for strategic and leadership positions, especially in international NGOs, where advanced degrees in relevant fields provide a theoretical foundation for policy formulation and donor relations. This study highlights the need for a balanced recruitment approach, particularly for mid-level roles that demand both practical skills and academic knowledge. It also identifies a gap between academic training and practical skills required in the NGO sector, emphasizing the importance of stronger collaboration between educational institutions and NGOs. These findings contribute to the broader debate on recruitment strategies, offering practical recommendations for optimizing talent acquisition in Sri Lanka's NGO sector.

**Keywords:** Academic Qualifications; Work Experience; Non-Governmental Organizations (Ngos)

### 1. Introduction

Recruitment plays a pivotal role in determining the success of any organization, particularly in dynamic sectors such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), where the workforce is critical to achieving mission-driven objectives. NGOs have become integral in addressing diverse socioeconomic challenges in Sri Lanka, including post-tsunami rehabilitation, poverty alleviation, community development, and emergency humanitarian aid (18). The effectiveness of these organizations depends heavily on their ability to recruit individuals who not only possess the necessary technical knowledge, but also the hands-on experience required to operate in often challenging and volatile environments.

In the Sri Lankan context, NGOs serve as important agents of change, filling gaps left by the state and private sector in crucial areas such as public health, education, and environmental sustainability (1). Over the past two decades, the NGO sector in Sri Lanka has expanded significantly owing to both internal developments and external funding, which has increased competition for skilled professionals. As a result, human resource (HR) professionals in the sector are constantly grappling with the question: *Is academic qualification or work experience more crucial for effective recruitment?*

\* Corresponding author: Abdul Hameed Mohamed Azam

Globally, recruitment practices are increasingly emphasizing the experience of academic credentials, particularly in sectors where hands-on skills and adaptability are key (7). This trend is echoed in Sri Lanka, where employers in various sectors place greater importance on practical experience to reduce training time and increase efficiency (20). However, the NGO sector has unique demands. Professionals in this sector must often balance a deep understanding of theoretical frameworks related to development and humanitarian issues with their ability to implement programs in complex environments (11).

Research in the Sri Lankan NGO sector has revealed a dual recruitment challenge. NGOs require individuals with strong academic backgrounds in fields such as public policy, international development, and social work (18). However, the practical demands of the job often require experience in dealing with grassroots communities, managing crises, and understanding local socio-political contexts (6). This duality makes it difficult for HR professionals to establish a consistent recruitment strategy, as both academic qualifications and experience are considered critical for fulfilling organizational goals.

Despite the importance of recruitment in this sector, there is a notable gap in empirical research that focuses specifically on how HR professionals in Sri Lankan NGOs weigh academic qualifications against work experience. This study seeks to address this gap by exploring HR professionals' perceptions of Sri Lankan NGOs regarding the importance of academic qualifications versus work experience during recruitment. Understanding these preferences is crucial for optimizing recruitment strategies, improving employability, and enhancing the overall effectiveness of Sri Lanka. Additionally, this study contributes to the broader global debate on the relative importance of academic credentials and work experience in contemporary recruitment practices.

### **1.1. Research Problem**

In the context of Sri Lankan NGOs, there is insufficient empirical evidence of the importance of academic qualifications or work experience in the recruitment process. NGOs, by nature, require a unique combination of skills, including technical expertise and practical field-based knowledge. The research problem, therefore, is: How do HR professionals in Sri Lankan NGOs prioritize academic qualification over work experience when making recruitment decisions?

### **1.2. Research Questions**

- What is more prominent in the recruitment process of HR professionals in Sri Lankan NGOs: Academic qualifications or work experience?
- How do the requirements for academic qualifications and work experience vary across roles (operational, managerial and strategic)?
- What are the perceived advantages of academic qualifications and work experience from the perspective of HR professionals?
- How do recruitment preferences align with organizational goals in the Sri Lankan NGO sector?

### **1.3. Research Objectives**

- To assess the relative importance of academic qualifications and work experience in recruitment decisions made by HR professionals in Sri Lankan NGOs.
- To examine differences in recruitment priorities based on the types of roles within the NGO sector.
- To understand the perceived value of academic credentials and their practical experience from the perspective of HR professionals.
- To provide recommendations for NGOs to optimize recruitment strategies to effectively meet organizational goals
- To contribute to the academic debate on qualifications versus experience, particularly within the NGO sector, in the Sri Lankan context.

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## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Theoretical Framework: Human Capital and Signaling Theories**

Human Capital Theory posits that education and training enhance an individual's productivity, increasing their value to potential employers (4). This theory is relevant in contexts such as NGOs, where specialized knowledge (e.g., in public policy, human rights, or development studies) can be critical to the job's core functions.

On the other hand, Signaling Theory (24) suggests that academic qualifications serve as a signal to employers about a candidate's potential competence and ability to learn, even if those skills are not immediately applicable to the job. However, in sectors that require fieldwork and adaptability, such as NGOs, experience often serves as a more immediate signal of capability as it directly reflects the candidate's ability to perform under real-world conditions.

## **2.2. Global Trends in Recruitment: Academic Qualifications vs. Experience**

The global debate over the importance of academic qualifications versus professional experience has gained traction in the last decade. Employers in sectors requiring practical skills are leaning more heavily towards candidates with substantial work experience, especially for operational roles. NGOs, focusing on fieldwork and community engagement, are at the forefront of this trend, valuing those who can demonstrate immediate operational effectiveness (12). In the NGO sector, practical experience often outweighs academic credentials in recruitment decisions, particularly when the role demands an understanding of the local contexts and operational challenges.

Research on NGOs across different regions has suggested a similar trend. Bode et al., (5) found that while academic qualifications are essential for higher-level roles such as policy development or advocacy, experience is highly valued for positions that require direct engagement with communities. Moreover, the unpredictable nature of NGO work, characterized by limited resources and shifting priorities, often necessitates candidates with prior experience in similar settings to manage crises and adapt to rapidly changing circumstances.

## **2.3. Recruitment in Sri Lankan NGOs: The Balance of Academic and Practical Knowledge**

In the Sri Lankan context, NGOs face unique challenges in balancing academic qualifications with work experiences during recruitment (1). Walton (28) highlighted that the post-conflict environment and ongoing socio-economic challenges in the country make navigating these complex realities a highly sought-after trait in NGO recruitment. HR professionals in Sri Lanka often prioritize candidates with field experience in humanitarian aid, disaster management, and conflict resolution given the country's historical context of civil unrest and natural disasters.

Nanthagopan and Williams (19) emphasize that Sri Lankan NGOs, particularly those operating in rural and post-conflict zones, place a high value on work experience. Candidates who have previously worked in similar roles are seen as being more capable of handling the operational difficulties associated with such environments, including resource constraints, community resistance, and political instability. These roles often require immediate problem-solving abilities and cultural sensitivity, both of which are typically developed through field experience, rather than formal education.

Simultaneously, academic qualifications remain significant for strategic and leadership positions in Sri Lankan NGOs, especially in organizations focused on policy advocacy or working closely with international donors (21). A formal educational background in areas such as international development, development studies, public health, or law is essential for leadership roles that require expertise in formulating policies, securing funding, or engaging with government entities. Somarathna (22) found that HR professionals in larger organizations tend to prioritize candidates with advanced degrees, particularly when hiring senior positions that require strategic oversight and donor relations management, which is also practiced by international NGOs operating in Sri Lanka.

## **2.4. Role-Specific Recruitment Practices**

The importance of academic qualifications versus experience also varies significantly, based on specific roles within NGO. Kumara and Handapangoda (14) argue that for operational roles, such as project officers, field coordinators, and community mobilizers, of NGOs in Sri Lanka overwhelmingly prioritize practical experience. These roles require candidates to have a strong understanding of local contexts, problem-solving abilities, and the ability to work in difficult or resource-scarce environments. This is consistent with the findings of Dulaimi, (8) who indicated that prior experience in similar operational settings often trumps formal education, even if the academic background is relevant to the NGO's thematic focus.

However, leadership and strategic roles within Sri Lankan NGOs are increasingly demanding both academic qualification and professional experience. Somarathna (22) note that senior managers and directors, especially in larger NGOs with international ties, are expected to have not only practical field experience, but also advanced degrees in development studies, economics, or other relevant disciplines. These roles require individuals to navigate complex funding environments, manage international partnerships, and develop long-term strategies that align with the global

development goals. Academic qualifications are often seen as providing the theoretical foundation necessary for such complex strategic decision-making.

### **2.5. The Perception of HR Professionals in the Sri Lankan NGO Sector**

HR professionals in Sri Lanka's NGO sector are tasked with the complex responsibility of balancing qualifications and experience when making recruitment decisions. Dulaimi (8) highlights that while candidates with formal education bring theoretical knowledge and credibility, those with substantial work experience are often more "job-ready," especially in operational contexts. In interviews with HR professionals across the sector, it was discovered that there is no one-size-fits-all approach, and recruitment preferences are heavily dependent on the role, the organization's specific needs, and the operational environment.

Further complicating recruitment is the increasing competition for skilled talent in the Sri Lankan NGO sector, with both local and international NGOs vying for candidates with a blend of qualifications and experience. Selvarajah et al., (21) argue that while experience is becoming more critical for certain positions, academic qualifications remain a significant criterion for higher-level leadership roles, particularly when NGOs need to engage with policy-making bodies, international donors, or the government. Additionally, HR professionals stress the importance of balancing the two based on the needs of the role and the organization's long-term strategic goals.

### **2.6. The Impact of Educational Institutions and Professional Development**

Educational institutions play a crucial role in preparing graduates for the NGO sector; however, there is a gap between academic training and the practical skills demanded by employers. Fernando et al., (9) noted that while universities in Sri Lanka offer degrees in development studies, social work, and public policy, graduates often lack the field experience needed to effectively transition into operational roles within NGOs. HR professionals have pointed to the need for stronger partnerships between academic institutions and NGOs to provide students with practical experience through internships, fieldwork, or case study-based learning modules.

Suresh, (26) argues that professional development programs and certifications in project management, conflict resolution, and community engagement could help bridge the gap between academic qualifications and practical experience. Such programs could enhance the employability of graduates by equipping them with the skills necessary to meet the immediate needs of NGOs while also allowing experienced professionals to formalize their knowledge through certification.

The existing body of research highlights the complex and often context-dependent nature of recruitment in the NGO sector, particularly in Sri Lanka. While academic qualifications provide theoretical knowledge and are valued for strategic and leadership positions, work experience is often seen as more critical for operational roles in which real-world problem-solving is essential. The literature also underscores the importance of a blended approach to leadership roles, in which a combination of academic credentials and field experience can enhance both operational effectiveness and strategic oversight. Future research should focus on refining the balance between these two factors, particularly considering the evolving demands of the Sri Lankan NGO sector.

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## **3. Research methodology**

### **3.1. Research Design**

This study adopted a qualitative research methodology, utilizing semi-structured interviews with HR professionals in Sri Lankan NGOs to gather in-depth insights. A qualitative approach is best suited to exploring complex, context-specific issues, such as recruitment preferences, which involve subjective perceptions and experiences (McCann et al.,) (16).

### **3.2. Sample Selection**

Purposive sampling was used to select 15 HR professionals from the prominent NGOs in Sri Lanka. These professionals were chosen based on recruitment experience and the diverse nature of their NGOs, covering areas such as humanitarian relief, education, and community development. The sample included HR managers, senior recruiters, Administrators and Project Managers to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the recruitment practices.

### 3.3. Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 60 min. The interviews were conducted either face-to-face or via virtual platforms depending on the participant's availability. The interview questions were as follows.

- Role of Academic Qualifications in Recruitment.
- Importance of work experience in different roles.
- HR professionals' perceptions of the balance between academic qualifications and experience.
- Specific examples of recruitment decisions where either qualifications or experience took precedence.

### 3.4. Data Analysis

The data were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis, a method that allows for the identification of patterns and themes within qualitative data. This method involves a systematic process of coding data, searching for themes, and refining them to produce a coherent and meaningful analysis (Fuchs) (10). NVivo software was used to organize and code the data. The coding process involved several rounds of reviews to ensure the reliability and validity of the findings. Themes were categorized into two main areas: preferences for academic qualifications and work experience, with subcategories for different types of roles.

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## 4. Results and Discussion

The results of this study, based on interviews with 15 HR professionals from various NGOs in Sri Lanka, revealed key insights into how academic qualifications and work experience are weighed in the recruitment process. The findings highlight the context-specific nature of recruitment in the Sri Lankan NGO sector, where a variety of factors, such as the specific job role, organizational goals, and external funding requirements, affect the decision-making process of HR professionals. The results are presented alongside interpretations supported by previous research, focusing on the core themes of operational roles, strategic roles, organizational culture, and the balancing act between academic credentials and practical experience.

### 4.1. Preference for Work Experience in Operational Roles

Across the board, HR professionals expressed a strong preference for work experience over academic qualifications when recruiting operational roles, such as field coordinators, project officers, and community mobilizers. These roles require candidates to possess practical skills, adaptability, and problem-solving abilities that can only be gained through hands-on experiences in similar environments. Respondents emphasized that operational positions often involve working in challenging environments, such as rural or post-conflict zones, where the ability to quickly respond to crises and manage local dynamics is critical.

One HR manager explained,

"We need people who can hit the ground running. No academic study can fully prepare someone to work in the field. We prefer candidates who have already navigated these challenges."

This aligns with previous research by Lisao et al., (15), who found that NGOs, particularly in developing regions, prioritize work experience for roles that require direct engagement with communities. These findings also reflect Taira et al., (27) who observed that in the post-conflict areas of Sri Lanka, the capacity to work under pressure and manage limited resources effectively is valued more than academic qualifications.

#### 4.1.1. Interpretation

The preference for experience in operational roles indicates a clear recognition among HR professionals that practical hands-on skills are essential for success in these positions. Although academic credentials provide a theoretical understanding, the unpredictable and volatile nature of NGO fieldwork demands candidates who have already proven their ability to adapt and to deliver results in challenging contexts.

### 4.2. Academic Qualifications Valued in Strategic and Leadership Roles

The HR professionals indicated that academic qualifications played a more prominent role in leadership and strategic positions, such as program directors or policy advisors. Advanced or Master degrees in relevant fields, such as international development, development studies, public health, and law, are essential for individuals in these positions,

as they provide the theoretical and analytical skills needed for policy formulation, long-term strategic planning, and managing complex relationships with donors and government entities.

One HR professional noted,

“For our senior management roles, we look for candidates with strong academic backgrounds. They need to have theoretical knowledge to guide our organization and understand the larger development landscape.”

This finding aligns with Akurugoda et al., (1), who found that leadership roles in international NGOs operating in Sri Lanka often require advanced degrees, as these positions involve significant engagement with international stakeholders and donors.

#### *4.2.1. Interpretation*

In strategic and leadership roles, academic qualifications provide a foundation for theoretical knowledge, critical thinking, and policy development, which are essential for guiding organizational strategies and interfacing with external stakeholders. While practical experience is still valued, HR professionals in these roles tend to prioritize candidates who can combine academic expertise with on-the-ground leadership experience.

### **4.3. Differences Between Local and International NGOs**

This study also revealed notable differences between the recruitment practices of local and international NGOs. Local NGOs were found to prioritize work experience more heavily across all roles, whereas international NGOs placed greater emphasis on academic qualifications, especially for specialized positions in fields such as public health, environmental policy, and legal advocacy. This distinction is driven primarily by the operational scope and funding models of these organizations.

An HR professional from an international NGO explained the following

“Our funding often comes from international donors who expect us to recruit staff with strong academic credentials. For certain specialized roles, such as health programs, we require candidates to have both academic expertise and experience.”

This finding is supported by Subedi and Wagner, (25) who noted that international NGOs tend to align their recruitment practices with global standards, thus requiring higher academic qualifications for positions involving interactions with international partners and donors. Keating and Thrandardottir, (13) further corroborate that international NGOs, particularly those operating in Sri Lanka, are under pressure to demonstrate professionalism and accountability to international donors, which is often reflected in their preferences for candidates with formal qualifications.

#### *4.3.1. Interpretation*

The distinction between local and international NGOs reflects the differing operational and funding requirements. While local NGOs may be more flexible in prioritizing work experience, international NGOs are often constrained by donor expectations and global standards that emphasize academic credentials. This suggests that candidates seeking positions in international NGOs may need to invest more in formal education to meet these expectations, whereas those applying to local NGOs may rely heavily on their field experience.

### **4.4. The Need for a Balance Between Academic Qualifications and Experience**

Despite general trends, most HR professionals have highlighted the importance of a balance between academic qualifications and experience, especially in mid-level management roles. These roles, which often involve both operational and strategic planning, require candidates to have practical experience and solid academic foundation. HR professionals have suggested that a combination of formal education and field experience makes candidates more versatile and adaptable to the evolving needs.

One HR professional mentioned,

“The ideal candidate is someone who has both the theoretical knowledge from their academic background and the practical skills that come from experience. This combination allows them to navigate both the strategic and operational demands of the job.”

This is consistent with the findings of Sousa and Neves (23) who argued that NGOs require professionals to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Alam (2) also emphasized the importance of combining both academic qualifications and field experience to enhance operational efficiency and strategic thinking.

#### 4.4.1. Interpretation

While there is a clear preference for experience in operational roles and academic qualifications in strategic roles, this study suggests that a balance between them is ideal, especially for mid-level positions. This combination enables candidates to handle both day-to-day operational challenges and contribute to the organization's broader strategic goals.

### 4.5. The Role of Educational Institutions and Professional Development

Finally, HR professionals expressed concern about the gap between academic training and practical skills required for NGO work. They noted that despite holding relevant degrees, many recent graduates from Sri Lankan universities, often lack the field experience and practical skills required to thrive in their operational roles. Some studies have suggested that stronger collaboration between NGOs and educational institutions can help bridge this gap through internships, fieldwork opportunities, and practical training modules.

One HR manager commented:

"Graduates often come to us with theoretical knowledge, but they lack the hands-on experience we need. There should be more opportunities for students to gain practical experience before entering the workforce."

This echoes the findings of Munasinghe (17) who argue that Sri Lankan universities need to incorporate more practical components into their programs to better prepare graduates for the NGO sector. Barrows et al., (3) also recommended that professional development programs and certifications should be offered to help graduates build the practical skills they need to succeed in the field.

#### 4.5.1. Interpretation

The gap between academic qualifications and practical experience highlights a key area for improvement in Sri Lanka's educational system. By fostering closer collaboration between NGOs and universities and providing more opportunities for students to gain hands-on experience, graduates can become better equipped to meet the demands of the NGO sector.

The results of this study highlighted the nuanced and context-dependent nature of recruitment in the Sri Lankan NGO sector. While work experience is prioritized for operational roles owing to the need for adaptability and field-ready skills, academic qualifications play a more prominent role in strategic and leadership positions. International NGOs, influenced by global standards and donor expectations, tend to place more emphasis on academic qualifications, while local NGOs prioritize experience. However, HR professionals recognize the value of a balance between academic knowledge and practical experience, particularly in mid-level management. Finally, the findings reveal a gap between academic training and the practical skills required by NGOs, suggesting a need for greater collaboration between educational institutions and the NGO sector to better prepare future professionals.

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## 5. Conclusion and Implications

This study provides a comprehensive exploration of the balance between academic qualifications and work experience in the recruitment practices of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Sri Lanka from the perspective of HR professionals. The findings reveal a nuanced approach to recruitment shaped by the specific operational needs of NGOs, the nature of the roles being filled, and the broader context in which these organizations operate.

For operational roles, where demands are primarily focused on fieldwork and direct community engagement, work experience is often prioritized. Candidates with practical hands-on skills acquired through prior experience in similar environments are seen as more valuable as they can immediately contribute to the organization's mission without the need for extensive training. This is particularly true in the post-conflict and rural areas of Sri Lanka, where adaptability, crisis management, and problem-solving are critical.

Conversely, academic qualifications play a more prominent role in strategic leadership. HR professionals in international NGOs and larger organizations value formal education, particularly in roles that require strategic

oversight, policy development, and donor relations. In such cases, advanced degrees in fields such as international development, development studies, public policy, and public health provide the theoretical knowledge necessary for long-term planning, securing funding, and navigating complex stakeholder relationships.

The distinction between local and international NGOs further illustrates the diverse recruitment landscapes. Local NGOs tend to place greater emphasis on work experience across all levels, while international NGOs, often guided by donor requirements and global standards, place a higher premium on academic credentials, especially in specialized roles.

However, this study also highlights the growing recognition of the need for a balance between academic qualification and experience, particularly for mid-level positions. HR professionals acknowledge that an ideal candidate combines theoretical knowledge with practical expertise, as this allows them to address both operational challenges and contribute to the strategic development of the organization.

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## **6. Implications for HR Practices in Sri Lankan NGOs**

The results of this study have important implications for HR professionals, educational institutions, and jobseekers in Sri Lanka's NGO sector.

### **6.1. Tailored Recruitment Strategies**

NGOs should adopt more role-specific recruitment strategies and, clearly define the qualifications and experiences required for each position. For operational roles, experience in similar environments should be prioritized, whereas academic qualifications should be emphasized for strategic and leadership roles. This approach can help NGOs to better match their candidates' skills with the demands of their positions, leading to improved performance and reduced turnover.

### **6.2. Bridging the Gap Between Education and Practice**

There is a clear gap between the academic training and practical skills required in the NGO sector, particularly in terms of operational roles. Educational institutions should work closely with NGOs to design curricula that incorporate practical learning opportunities such as internships, fieldwork, and community engagement projects. This collaboration will help students gain real-world experience that they need to be competitive in the NGO job market and more effective in their roles.

### **6.3. Professional Development and Certification**

NGOs and HR professionals should consider offering professional development programs and certifications to bridge the gap between academic knowledge and practical experience. This could include training in project management, conflict resolution, and community mobilization, helping individuals with strong academic backgrounds gain the operational skills necessary to succeed in the field. For experienced professionals, these certifications could formalize their knowledge and open doors to more strategic roles within NGOs.

### **6.4. Flexible and Dynamic Recruitment Processes**

This study's findings underscore the importance of flexibility in recruitment practices. NGOs need to be dynamic in their approach, adjusting recruitment strategies based on their specific roles, locations, and organizational needs. For instance, positions in rural or post-conflict areas may require candidates with a stronger background in fieldwork, whereas roles in urban areas may require more academically qualified individuals with advanced degrees.

### **6.5. Diversity in Candidate Profiles**

HR professionals should aim to build teams that reflect a diversity of skills, blending candidates with strong academic qualifications and those with substantial field experience. Such teams can leverage both academic knowledge and practical skills, ensuring a well-rounded approach to problem-solving and program implementation. This mix of expertise can enhance the overall effectiveness and adaptability of an organization.

## **7. Implications for Job Seekers and Career Development**

### **7.1. Strategic Career Planning**

For individuals seeking to enter or advance within the NGO sector, it is important to align their career path with the specific demands of the roles they target. For operational roles, gaining hands-on experience through internships, volunteer work, and entry-level positions in community-based project is essential. For leadership and strategic roles, pursuing relevant academic qualifications and professional certifications can be the key to advancing one's career.

### **7.2. Lifelong Learning and Upskilling**

Given the evolving nature of NGO work, job seekers should embrace continuous learning and upskilling to remain competitive. This may include pursuing additional academic qualifications, professional development opportunities, or gaining field experience in new areas of specialization. As this study indicates that the ability to adapt to changing circumstances and address diverse challenges is highly valued in this sector.

### **7.3 Future Research Agenda**

Although this study provides important insights into recruitment practices among Sri Lankan NGOs, several areas require further investigation.

#### *7.2.1. Comparative Studies Across Sectors*

Future research could explore how recruitment preferences differ across various sectors within Sri Lanka, such as Private sector, State Sector, and other Non-profit organizations. Such comparative studies would provide a broader understanding of how academic qualifications and experiences are valued in various contexts.

#### *7.2.2. Quantitative Analysis*

While this study employed a qualitative approach, future research could benefit from a quantitative analysis that measures the specific weight of HR professionals assigned to academic qualifications versus experience. Surveys and statistical models can provide more detailed data on how these factors influence recruitment decisions.

#### *7.2.3. Impact of External Factors*

Further investigation should focus on the impact of external factors, such as donor requirements or government policies, on recruitment practices. Understanding how these factors influence the balance between qualifications and experience would help NGOs better navigate recruitment complexities in the context of external pressure.

#### *7.2.4. Gender and Inclusion in Recruitment Practices*

Examining gender and inclusion factors in recruitment decisions can provide additional insights, particularly in the NGO sector, which often prioritizes diversity and social equity. Future research could explore whether there are disparities in how academic qualifications and experiences are valued by male and female candidates or by candidates from marginalized communities.

#### *7.2.5. Longitudinal Studies on Recruitment Outcomes*

Longitudinal studies can track the long-term impacts of recruitment decisions on organizational performance, employee retention, and job satisfaction. This would provide NGOs with evidence-based insights into the effectiveness of different recruitment strategies and inform their future hiring practices.

This study contributes to the ongoing debate on the role of academic qualifications versus work experience in recruitment, particularly in the unique context of Sri Lankan NGOs. By offering insights into how HR professionals navigate this complex issue, this study underscores the need for tailored recruitment strategies that align with organizational needs, role demands, and external pressures. These findings provide a foundation for further research and practice, contributing to more effective recruitment and talent development in the NGO sector.

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## Compliance with ethical standards

### *Disclosure of conflict of interest*

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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