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Real-World Work Readiness of College Graduates in Bangladesh: The State of Practical Application of Theoretical Knowledge and Soft Skills in the Workplace

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In this paper, we will examine the adverse effect that globalization has on the commercialization of higher education in Bangladesh. The commercialization of higher education leads to a gap forming between theoretical and practical knowledge. One will find that a lot of college graduates face difficulties when joining the professional workforce. These difficulties arise due to many factors, but two of the major ones are as follows: 1. Lack of training for students at the university level on how to practically apply theoretical knowledge gained in class, in real world situations. 2. Lack of basic soft skills that are crucial for career development in the professional world. In our paper, we will discuss and analyze the lacking found in both the higher educational institutions and in students, and the adverse effects it has on the careers of graduates. In conclusion we will discuss our continuing research intentions using a scale that we have developed. Due to limited time and manpower, our research was a pilot study and has thus used convenience sampling from a single department of a private university for faculty interviews. The interviews conducted touched on the topics related to in-class and out of class experiences of both the teachers and their pupil. For teachers, we focused on whether they felt the need for better communicative methodologies for instruction provision and what they think are the key factors that handicap students in this education system. For students, our questions were more performance-centric as we tried to find out the key determinants that help good performers excel within both class environments and professional environments. We thereafter did a direct comparative analysis of the data collected from this group with the group that face difficulties in both the fields. The survey we conducted with former students who are currently employed, helped us find their thoughts on the pros and cons of the education curriculum they were once a part of, based on their firsthand experience. We also conduct interviews with industry recruiters and professionals for their feedback on the pros and cons of their recent entry-level recruits.

Keywords: Work readiness, soft skills, theoretical knowledge, practical knowledge, personal growth, organizational awareness, dependability.

Literature Review

We have extensively studied a list of various journal articles written on the limitation caused by neoliberalism, commodification and commercialization of higher education in countries, and the adverse effect it has had on its consumers, the students, and eventually the socio-economic aspect of the country.

For the basic definition of neoliberalism, we referred to the book titled 'A Brief History of Neoliberalism' by Harvey (2005).

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For the education as a service and the growth of private universities we have used the works of Knight (2003). For neoliberal governmentality, its role in higher education, and the changes caused by neoliberalism in higher education via mode of control, management function, goals, work relations, accountability, marketing, pathology, research, and de-professionalism, we explored the works of Olssen and Peters (2005).

For discussion on the expansion of private universities in Bangladesh, explanation of SPHE 2006-2026, its roles, motive and its critics, and the effect it has on private and public universities, we studied the work of Kabir (2010).

To understand what skills are considered important from the point of view of employers and human resources personnel, we looked into the work of Eisner (2010).

To understand privatization and marketization of higher education, and the kind of environment they create, and the role of the student and university in the development of this market environment in Bangladesh, we studied the work of Anwaruddin (2013).

Lastly, even though not mentioned in the paper in detail, for our future work, we have developed a scale for measuring the workforce readiness of graduates based on our findings from field studies and also the existing works by Caballero, Walker, Fuller-Tyszkiewicz (2011), and thoroughly understanding the works by Casner-Lotto, and Barrington (2006).

It must also be mentioned that while proper citations will be made wherever applicable, this paper is primarily of heuristic and experiential in nature and most of the observations are based on our observed views on the subject, and the sources as mentioned above serve to reciprocate supportively the factual affirmations of our said views, observations and findings.

Analysis

Globalization effects the world through the social, environmental, cultural, economic and political elements of society. Despite the fact that many of its effects are known on a broad scale, the actual definition of Globalization is often left ambiguous. One of the main reason for this is because it is hard to define globalization which stratifies everyone. Since globalization affects us in so many different ways, we must examine globalization from many different perspectives.

Oftentimes, globalization is examined through a socio-economic lens, while ignoring the other perspectives. One will find that even sociologist, economist differ on their perspective on what is truly globalization. Regardless of what perspective one views globalization from, the fact is that globalization is here and the fact that it affects every aspect of our lives is very real. While these effects of globalization can be helpful, it can also have a significant negative influence as well.

The influence of globalization can be seen everywhere in our country and the education sector is highly influenced by it as well. Through policies and changes passed under neoliberalism as well as the demand for an 'international' level of education we have seen a shift in how education is promoted on a grander scale in Bangladesh, through the often different curriculums emulated from foreign universities and applied to the local universities, thereby proving a lack of standardization in the context of what is global and what is just for a local environment that can stay abreast with the global standards of both theoretical knowledge and workplace practical ability in individuals who pass through this higher education system.

'Neoliberalism is a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.' (Harvey, 2005).

In simple terms, neoliberalism is basically a form of globalization where free trade and trading with other countries is encouraged as well as policies passed by the World Bank, General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Neoliberalism has led to the deregulation and withdrawal of the state. Neoliberalism has changed our way of thinking and political-economic practices. Neoliberalism also *'seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market'* (Harvey, 2005). It is true that neoliberalism has been ingrained in our lives especially through policies passed under it.

Changes that have occurred to education under neoliberalism is marked clearly by the created shifts or changes in governmentality, accountability, mode of control, goals, work relations, marketing, pedagogy, management function and research within universities (Olssen & Peters, 2005).

Neoliberalism appears as a new form of governmentality in higher education. The neoliberal governmentality has made change in the education by creating a structural shift. The neoliberal governmentality has introduced a hierarchical mode of authority which cause de-professionalization for academic staff. The de-professionalization involves three key actions which are listed below (Olssen & Peters, 2005):

- A Shift from collegial or democratic governance in flat structures, to hierarchical models based on dictated management *specifications* of job performance in principal-agent chains of command.
- The implementation of restructuring initiatives in response to market and state demands involves increasing *specifications* by management over workloads and course content by management, such hierarchically imposed *specifications* erode traditional conceptions of *professional autonomy* over work in relation to both teaching and research. Neoliberalism systematically deconstructs the space in terms of which professional autonomy is exercised.
- Traditional conceptions of *professionalism* involved an ascription of rights and powers over work in line with classical liberal notions of freedom of the individual. Market pressures increasingly encroach and redesign their traditional understandings of rights, as TEIs must adapt to market trends (for example, just as individual departments and academics are being told of the necessity for acquiring external research grants, so they are also being told they must teach summer schools).

Higher education in Bangladesh has gone through many transformations over the last two decades; however one major issue has not yet been completely addressed. The Private University Act, which was first put into action in 1992 in Bangladesh, allowed for private universities to open up. Since then, there has been an ever increasing number of private universities that have mushroomed all across the country. According to Bangladesh's University Grant Commission's (UGC) website, there are currently 91 private universities and 37 public universities, and of the 91 private institutions, 5 have not been recognized by the government yet, therefore irking the notion that not all university are approved by the UGC or give assurance that they are providing quality over quantity. According to the findings of a study conducted by Sardar M. Anwaruddin in 2013 in Bangladesh, there were 54 private universities recognized by the government. That number of private universities has spontaneously grown from the meager 54 to an astounding 86 approved universities as of April, 2016. That is a 46.44% increase in under three years' time.

The University Grants Commission is officially the legislative apex body that is concerned with the standards of teaching and research in public and private universities within Bangladesh.

> *"It is believed that trade, coupled with commercialization and commodification of higher education, will put more importance on economic benefits than on the academic, social, scientific and cultural contributions of higher education to society."* (Knight, 2003)

With technical support from the World Bank, the University Grants Commission came up with the Strategic Plan for Higher Education: 2006-2026 (SPHE). The core objective of this plan has been to connect education with market-driven economic forces. However, this plan or policy has apparently had a negative impact on students, teachers and both public and private universities since the SPHE suggests that the government reduce the funding give to higher education in order to reduce the *"public expenditure"* which would be accomplished through *"increasing tuition fees, financial aid, student loans, various cost-recovery measures and different income-generating measures"*. Such findings have led to the belief that universities are now more like corporate businesses and profit centric instead of being the traditional institutions of education whose core responsibility is to generate new knowledge for the student market. SPHE has thus been viewed as a neoliberal policy, the likes of which is likely to have socio-economic consequences in small countries such as Bangladesh (Kabir, 2010).

All these policies and structural changes have led to an environment where education is seen to have been commercialized, privatized, and turned into a commodity. All of this in context influences and affects the roles of universities, teachers and student in a society. Quoting Sardar M. Anwaruddin's use of Nordensvard framework:

> *"In these neoliberal times marked by competition for economic gains, we can understand students' roles in society through a framework developed by Johan Nordensvard (2011) Using three metaphors, this framework introduces students in three roles: the student as a consumer, as a manager and as a commodity. As consumers, students receive educational service for their interests, buy diplomas to improve their acceptance in the labour market, and buy 'techniques, skills and knowledge for becoming a knowledge worker and self-regulated learner'. As managers, they invest in their human capital in order to supply various services, update their skills and abilities according to the principles of demand and supply, and carefully use education to make themselves employable. Finally, students are treated as a commodity in the sense that they prepare themselves as 'accountable, transparent, competitive, and efficient' human capital and sell their 'highly skilled human capital' to the corporate world."*

Over the years, one will find that a lot of college graduates face difficulties when joining the real-world workforce. These difficulties arise due to a lack of training or teaching at the higher education level of how to act and perform within a professional workforce environment. While it is understood that certain skills, specifically an individual's level of interpersonal skills, may not be completely constructed in any education systems, but the provision of basic knowledge and fine tuning of soft skills can be provided by the same education systems.

While it is evident that neoliberalism of education has led to its commercialization and unsettled a standardized education platform for the most part, what is important is to see what the actual lacking have turned out to be and how it can be improved upon. The role of the universities, the teachers and the students in reforming a strategy within this curriculum will bring about a positive change in the learning methodology.

Discussion

While on our quest to prepare for an analysis of the bigger picture inclusive of not just those involved in the educational sector but also in the corporate world - real employers who seek talent for their businesses; we made the most surprising discovery.

Speaking to the HR, department heads and managers at Aamra Companies, Grameenphone, the Standard Chartered Bank, British American Tobacco (BAT), Magnum Steel and ADCOMM Limited, we found out the following information:

i. A new graduate is a risky investment
ii. They lack proper communication skills (both spoken and written)
iii. Majority of them lack adaptability and initiative
iv. Many lack a sense of time and ethics
v. Practical application of theoretical knowledge is lacking
vi. Lack of practicality in any given situation is a common trait
vii. Most of them are undependable

The 7 points stated above are only the common ones and does not include a whole array of other negatives. While the sure positive of a new university graduate recruit is their initial enthusiasm as was agreed all across the board, these chief seven common factors often lead administrators and the HR personnel to not hiring someone new.

While the question arises how it is then possible that so many young graduates get job right after they finish school, it should also be noted the quality of the employer and the requirements of the firm hiring the students must be factored in.

Fascinatingly, upon conducting basic experimental qualitative interviews with specific sets of questions for students, faculties, the office of Career Guidance and Placement at Independent University, Bangladesh, students who have graduated and joined the workforce, and lastly another set of questions for employers, we were able to find out a lot.

Within a very short period of time, we conceptualized and materialized our pilot project to find out more. We were able to conduct our interviews within the School of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences only given time and manpower restraints were key factors.

The teachers we interviewed indicated what was mostly mentioned earlier in this paper in regards to the commercialization of education but most of them did mention how there is still room for further improvements especially in regards to research, and in regards to students' development through higher education; the basic beat of the story was the same as we heard while interviewing the industry professionals and recruiters. Those findings were further supported by the office of Career Guidance and Placement to some extent as well, and the same findings are best described in the quote below:

> *"…a 1993 study by Raymond et. al. of employer-identified attributes of entry level work success to be oral communication, writing, interpersonal dependability, and self-starting/motivation. They report a 1994 study by Paolillo finding most important skills for graduating business students to be communication, getting alone with others, dependability, initiative, problem-solving, and creative-thinking"* (Eisner, 2010).

Of the recommendations mentioned by the companies we had talked to, the ones that we found common and important to them are as follows:

i. In order to make all students workforce ready, the integration of a better syllabus for core courses that concentrate on the basics of a field is much required. While this duty is for the universities to tackle, the students must also learn enough to understand the demands and competition of the job market and accordingly aim to better themselves by gaining knowledge from these courses and opting for multiple internships.

ii. Multiple internships will allow students to explore the various specialties of their chosen field of study. The internships maybe directly related to their career and at the same time, they will gain firsthand experience of the real job world. This makes a fresh graduate more attractive to employers as not only does a candidate with multiple internship have the experience, but they also generally possess a headstrong attitude of what type of job they are precisely looking for, thereby ensuring the employer that the individual is likely a good investment.

iii. Even if neoliberalism is prevalent in every part of a university's operation, the office of Career Guidance and Placement needs to start forming professional Organizational Affiliations and expand their services to career counselling and specialized internship placement and not limit themselves to simply sending out students' Curriculum Vitae's and Resumes to only a handful of organizations.

Our few interviews with the students amounted to a lot of disappointment. While many were not only very proactive about their education and future career planning, many were found to not even know the meaning of internship, workforce readiness, that their university has an office of Career Guidance and Placement, or even answer who is responsible for making them workforce ready.

Lastly, the few interviews with the students who have graduated from Bangladeshi institutions and have joined the professional workforce have yielded extraordinary insight into the challenges they had initially faced upon entering the workforce and how they overcame those hurdles. Their answers too were in tandem with the observations of the employers and HR personnel.

Our observation thus far has led us to believe that neoliberalism has purportedly derailed the primary focus of universities, that it is somehow affected not only the students' life during their years at the institution, but also taken a long term toll on them since it partially plays a part in the professional career growth of students. This chasing after an 'international education' standard has made us sit and think a little bit. Is this in fact a desire for the universities and their 'consumers' to become global?

If such is the case, then why not prepare the students for a globally local environment that will not only help them with their careers or further their education here but also elsewhere? Why not go 'glocal'? With the vernacular limitation existing in Bangladesh, why not opt for best of both worlds instead of the juxtaposition of being completely local and trying to be global, that too by commercializing and commodifying education? The blindsiding catch-22 is a dilemma that can only be solved through the proactivity of both the students, the higher education institutions and lastly but most importantly the UGC.

Conclusion

From our basic research, it has been understood that there is indeed a need to further our research and find out more about the persistent problems and develop a framework to counter the issues that will help all parties involved in the field of higher education system in Bangladesh. Therefore, it is our earnest hope that through our further dedicated research on this subject, we will be able to pinpoint in-depth where

students, universities, and the education system is lacking or what can be improved further. We plan to advance this study by conducting one-on-one interviews with students, faculty members from each school, multiple universities, and industry specialists, HR personnel and administrators, all from different locations of the country, to see if there are any common recurring themes. With these interviews on hand we can start to see what we need to focus upon. We hope to help future graduates and the higher education system by presenting our findings that will help resolve existing issues which would be beneficial to the future of Bangladesh.

Importantly, to ensure we are on track, and in the case anyone else wishes to further this research, we have developed a scale to measure workforce readiness of university graduates within the Bangladeshi context. The basic elements of the scale that we have developed to assess workforce readiness of university graduates in Bangladesh was based of the Work Readiness Scale (WRS) developed Caballero, Walker, Fuller-Tyszkiewicz (2011), however we have added many more questions based on our pilot study that are relevant to Bangladesh, since the demography, socio-economic culture, vernacular culture, and social culture is very different than the existing WRS scale. We used a Likert scale with a five-point system (1-5): Strongly Disgree to Strongly Agree.

Upon running a test, the case processing summary proved its validity.

Case Processing Summary

		N	%
Cases	Valid	80	100.0
	Excluded[a]	0	.0
	Total	80	100.0

a. Listwise deletion based on all variables in the procedure.

We calculated each section to see where the subject's strengths and weaknesses lay. The highest possible score for each section is 50 and the lowest possible score is 10. The highest score for overall total is 500 and lowest possible score is 100. We use the Cronbach's alpha test to test reliability of the scale. Our scale had a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.856; this means that our scale has good internal consistency.

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.856	.901	111

The full scale that we have aptly titled as the 'Bangladesh Graduate Work Readiness Scale' (BGWRS) is presented below.

The Bangladesh Graduate Work Readiness Scale

		Strongly Disagree		Neutral		Strongly Agree
A	**Motivation: commitment, drive, persistence, and achievement orientation.**					
1.	Eager to throw self into work					
2.	Work on improving self					
3.	Thrive to completing tasks and achieving results					
4.	Do not allow failures or mistakes to discourage self					
5.	Eager to get involved in projects					
6.	Set high standards for self and others					
7.	Passionate about field of study and or work					
8.	Strive to perform to the best of abilities					
9.	Look for new opportunities					
10.	Hope to become the best					
B	**Maturity: sense of responsibility/accountability, self-awareness, and mental/emotional maturity.**					
11.	Not easily offended					
12.	Do not take things personally					
13.	Open to suggestions for trying things differently					
14.	Not intolerant of critics and criticism					
15.	React to a situation with thought and calmness					
16.	Do not have improper emotional responses					
17.	Take responsibility for decisions and actions					
18.	Do not impose superiority over others with lesser knowledge					
19.	Do not have violent outburst at work					
20.	Do not blame others for one's own mistakes					
C	**Personal growth/development: Willingness to learn, openness to feedback, and developmental insight.**					
21.	Learn from long-serving employees					
22.	Learn from subordinate colleagues					
23.	Open to listening to other's suggestions/advice					
24.	Do not have a tendency to judge others					
25.	Open to opportunities to learn and grow					
26.	Believe that feedbacks are learning opportunities					
27.	Believe that all entry-level recruits need to be willing to start at the bottom					
28.	Awareness of one's own strengths and weaknesses					
29.	Believe that being successful at work is very important					
30.	Believe in self direction					
D	**Organizational awareness: Understanding of organizational structures, awareness of organizational culture, and rule/process conscious.**					
31.	Understand organizational processes					
32.	Learn as much about the organization					
33.	Keep abreast of business affairs					
34.	Follow issues that are relevant to the organization's business					
35.	Believe that the organization's values and beliefs form a part of its culture					
36.	Do not overstep designated boundaries and limitations					
37.	Follow organizational procedure and decorum					
38.	Follow the organization's chain of command					
39.	Have concrete knowledge of the organization's house rules of communication					
40.	Do not have disregard of authority					

E	Technical focus: Confidence in technical / theoretical knowledge, initiative, personal structure, and task management.					
41.	Confident about learned knowledge					
42.	Not overoptimistic to take new tasks without considering variables					
43.	Can multitask					
44.	Not stressed when multitasking					
45.	Solid theoretical understanding of field of work					
46.	Confident in technical competency					
47.	Have an eye for detail					
48.	Can apply theoretical knowledge practically					
49.	Can properly manage time					
50.	Eager to take lead or initiate progress					
F	Interpersonal orientation: Communication skills, social confidence, collaboration /teamwork, building relationships/engaging with others, and social intelligence.					
51.	Comfortable in approaching senior people at work					
52.	Know when it appropriate to speak up or stay quiet					
53.	Not uncomfortable about asking questions when unsure					
54.	Do not find it challenging to manage new social situations					
55.	Do not find it difficult to establish trust and rapport with people					
56.	People approach you for original ideas					
57.	Can develop relationships with others easily					
58.	Amicable					
59.	Expressive					
60.	Good at reading body language					
G	Attitudes to work: optimism, respect for others, realistic expectations, and humility.					
61.	Tolerant towards critics and criticism					
62.	Do not impose superiority over others with lesser knowledge					
63.	Respect colleagues					
64.	Respect authority figures					
65.	Understand the need to start from the bottom to gain experience					
66.	Strive to be successful at work					
67.	Set high standards for self and others					
68.	Being the best in your field is very important					
69.	Have a matured view of life					
70.	Humble and amicable towards everyone					
H	Problem solving: Analytical/evaluative, decision making, and ideas generation.					
71.	Do not face difficulty starting tasks					
72.	Do not have trouble understanding abstract ideas					
73.	People approach you for original ideas					
74.	Can analyzing and solve complex problems					
75.	Not indecisive about prioritizing complex works					
76.	Not often indecisive					
77.	Can solve sudden problems					
78.	Find and apply unorthodox solution to problems					
79.	Take initiative to solve problems that others cannot					
80.	Do not often make decisions or work in haste					
I	Adaptability: Open to change (flexibility), acceptance of diversity, and able to adapt behavior.					
81.	Calm and relaxed when faced with adversity					
82.	Can deal with competing demands					
83.	Not overwhelmed by challenging circumstances					

84.	Not upset if others change the way you have organized things					
85.	Like the idea of change in general					
86.	Interested in learning new things					
87.	Can ably apply learned knowledge in workplace					
88.	Adapt easily to new situations					
89.	Can work with people who are from different ethnicity					
90.	Can adjust communication and conduct as the situation demands					
J	**Resilience: Resilience to negative feedback, and capacity to deal with competing work demands/challenges.**					
91.	Believe that you will succeed with the goals I have set					
92.	Believe that feedbacks are learning opportunities					
93.	Can cope with multiple demands					
94.	Negative criticism will not break you					
95.	Can complete tasks that are given to you on a timely fashion					
96.	Can make a dysfunctional team work					
97.	Can work in a dysfunctional team					
98.	Can meet multiple deadlines without stress					
99.	Headstrong and focused under pressure					
100.	Willing to cooperate with challenging people for solution					

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