

Work Integrated Learning at Tertiary Level to Enhance Graduate Employability in Bangladesh

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Abstract

In the last few years, higher education institutions (HEIs) in Bangladesh have been under severe pressure to transform the way they operate. The present Government of Bangladesh requires all universities to improve their quality of education and has implemented various projects such as Higher Education Quality Enhancement Project (HEQEP) in collaboration with the World Bank. As Bangladesh has set a target to transition out of the status of Least Developed Country (LDC) to Developing country by 2024, graduate employability and education quality are pivotal interests for the Government of Bangladesh. This paper investigates the concept of work integrated learning (WIL) and generic skills vital to enhance the employability of the current graduates in Bangladesh. We explore different types of WIL that can be applied at higher academic institutions in Bangladesh and what are the various benefits of this type of learning to the key stakeholders, namely; students, universities and employers. Finally, we conclude by pointing out the prerequisites that need to be considered in order to successfully implement WIL in Bangladesh. This is a descriptive study and we have collected data from different secondary sources such as documents available from government agencies, research organizations, archives and library. Moreover, we have also used interviews from sources such as newspapers and magazines documenting views of well-respected academicians and renowned personalities in Bangladesh. Our findings indicate that in order to successfully integrate WIL, there are some prerequisites such as modifying the current curriculum, designing and offering work oriented courses, building strong connections with potential employers and creating awareness about WIL among faculty members and students.

Keywords: work integrated learning, generic skills, graduate employability, tertiary level, Bangladesh

1. Introduction

Today as Bangladesh is moving ahead to achieve its Millennium Goals, graduate employability and employment levels are important considerations for Government and the policy makers. Since the enactment of Private University Act of 1992, Bangladesh has experienced a massive growth in the number of HEIs, with the figures rising to 105 for private universities and 46 for public universities in 2019 (UGC:2019). Hence, the tertiary education sector in Bangladesh is one of the most overcrowded in the world. Due to such intense competition among the higher education institutions, employability of graduates is a critical factor for academic institutions' reputation, retention rates and course demand. HEIs in Bangladesh must ensure that their students are equipped with not only the disciplinary knowledge but also generic and transferable skills. This means that today HEIs in Bangladesh, need to produce graduates who are "work ready" and have "hands-on" work experience. Moreover, as the cost of higher education increased in Bangladesh over the last few years, this has further reinforced the importance of creating students' graduate employability.

To meet the challenges of the competitive global market, the Government of Bangladesh has taken an initiative to enhance the quality of education at the tertiary level. With the assistance of World Bank, the Government of Bangladesh has implemented a project called Higher Education Quality Enhancement Project (HEQEP). The main aim of this project is to improve the quality of teaching and learning and research capabilities at the tertiary level. Aligned with this aim, Government of Bangladesh (GOB) wants to create an efficient skilled workforce which can compete with the fierce global competition.

However, the present situation in Bangladesh is undesirable. According to the report "Asia-Pacific Employment and Social Outlook 2018" the youth unemployment in Bangladesh has doubled between 2010 and 2017, in a short span of only 7 years (Daily Star, November 19, 2018). A World Bank study has found that 46 percent of National University students in Bangladesh remain unemployed for at least 3 years on completion of their graduation. Moreover, a study

titled “Graduate Employability of Affiliated Colleges: New Evidence from Bangladesh” found that an unemployed graduate in Bangladesh has to apply for 17 jobs before landing a permanent job (Daily Star, May 11, 2019). As Bangladesh is gradually transforming into a middle income country, such statistics should be a matter of concern as demand for highly skilled and educated workers will increase in the coming years. The young population of Bangladesh need to play a significant role in the country’s development process but the current statistic indicates that most of the graduates in Bangladesh find difficult to land a decent job.

A report titled “Bangladesh Employment and Labor Market Watch 2018” published by an organization called the Center for Development and Employment Research (CDER) shows that the unemployment rate in Bangladesh is the highest among graduates with a tertiary degree (Daily Star, January 14, 2019). The unfortunate reality in Bangladesh at present is that most of the graduates coming out of universities fail to meet the current demands of today’s dynamic and competitive job market. As a result, the corporate bodies are forced to hire personnel from abroad. At present many foreigners have been recruited in different economic sectors in Bangladesh. Foreigners are mainly hired at mid-level management position of organizations along with important recruitment for top level positions such as managing directors at different multinational companies in Bangladesh. According to Home Minister, Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal, around 85486 foreigners work in Bangladesh and half of them are Indians (Prothom Alo, April 17, 2018). The employers allege that a gap of technical, professional and language skills exist, which is declining the employment prospects of the Bangladeshi graduates. Some of the economists further pointed out that the main reason for high unemployment trend is due to the fact that HEIs in Bangladesh are failing to produce highly skilled graduates which according to statistics, is the key requirement of the current job market. Hence every year a large number of young graduates in Bangladesh remain unemployed thus it is imperative for policy makers, academicians and universities to take urgent steps in order to enhance graduate employability in Bangladesh.

Although work integrated learning (WIL) is an internationally recognized strategy to enhance graduate employability but in Bangladesh it is completely a new concept. As the universities in Bangladesh are gaining greater awareness about developing not only the disciplinary knowledge but also the generic and soft skills of their students, integration of work oriented courses at tertiary level in Bangladesh can play a pivotal role in accomplishing this goal.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the following aspects: [1] to discuss the concept of WIL, [2] to understand why generic/soft skills are vital to enhance graduate employability, [3] to identify the various types of WIL that can be applied at HEIs in Bangladesh, [4] to explore the benefits of WIL for the key stakeholders and finally [5] to highlight the prerequisites necessary to successfully implement work integrated learning at HEIs in Bangladesh.

2. Generic Skills and its Importance to Improve Graduate Employability

In recent years there is a growing concern about teaching and learning performance at HEIs in Bangladesh due to the emerging gap between graduate attributes and industry requirements. This gap has led to lack of employability of students who are graduating from different universities in Bangladesh. Traditionally, courses integrated into a degree program are designed to develop the students’ theoretical knowledge on the subject with less emphasis on how they can apply this knowledge in real life scenarios. To address this critical issue, it is vital for HEIs to introduce work-integrated learning (WIL) programs for their students in order to assist the development of generic skills and relevant work experiences.

Generic skills are a set of skills that have potential broad application to a range of disciplines or circumstances. Nine commonly identified areas of generic capabilities are interpersonal skills, concept and analytical skills, oral communication skills, team skills, information literacy skills, written communication skills, self-management skills, learning and adaptability skills and problem-solving skills. Furthermore, ACCI/BCA project identified eight key skills: communication, teamwork, problem-solving, initiative and enterprise, planning and organizing, self-management, learning and technology (ACCI & BCA, 2002). On the other hand, employers have emphasized problem-solving, communication and teamwork skills in research (Harvey, Moon, & Geall, 1997; AC Nielsen Research Services, 2000; Kavanagh & Drennan, 2008). Despite the awareness of the importance of generic skills in universities, employers have questioned to what extent the universities do take active steps to develop their students’ generic skills. A survey of 92 employers by Daggett and Liu found that graduates’ skills in writing, presentation and interaction were lacking (Daggett & Liu, 1997). The gap between students’ generic skills and employers’ expectations illustrates the need for greater emphasis on developing generic skills which can be achieved through integration of work integrated learning into the curriculum. Moreover, generic skills possess the attribute of transferability. Whilst discipline-based knowledge becomes dated and is not transferable across different jobs, but generic skills rarely becomes obsolete and can be transferred into new career paths (Kavanagh & Drennan, 2008). Hence, development of students’ generic skills at HEIs in Bangladesh is critical as students with generic skills will have better employment prospects. Due to the strong

competition in the current job market in Bangladesh, only holding strong disciplinary knowledge does not itself guarantee employment hence creation of generic skills through work integrated learning is vital.

3. What is Work Integrated Learning (WIL)?

Work integrated learning is not a new thing in university context. Traditionally, WIL has been supported by employers who wish to recruit 'work-ready' graduates and by academics who want students to experience theory in practice. The ethos of WIL is based on the concept of active learning where learners proactively transition from listening to actually doing what they are being taught in the class (Bonwell & Eison, 1991). WIL involves combining traditional academic study or formal learning with students' exposure to practical work in their chosen field of work so that students are better equipped for entry into the workforce. WIL enable students to experience authentic work environment and learn to apply relevant disciplinary knowledge in a real world context. Moreover, WIL is considered a significant instrument to enhance graduate employability by enhancing students' confidence, building workplace capabilities and providing students with relevant knowledge regarding the nature and standard of specific industry skills.

Work integrated learning (WIL) is a curriculum design in which students spend time in professional work or other practical settings relevant to their degree of study. In WIL, students are encouraged to apply and learn disciplinary knowledge and skills in a real world context. WIL curricula may include things such as internships, supervised practice, temporary work placements and simulations. According to Cooper, Orrell, & Bowden (2010), WIL are those parts of a course of study which involve an experience undertaken within a real world setting. Patrick, Peach, & Pocknee (2008) define WIL as an umbrella term for a range of approaches and strategies that integrate theory with practice of work within a purposefully designed curriculum. WIL offers an approach of learning in universities where the aim is to blend the study undertaken by students within classroom with real world workplace practices. WIL will require students to engage in activities such as visiting industry experts, working with virtual customers and clients, running pretend businesses, engaging in banking, teaching or other practices within the pedagogies of the university.

According to Moreland (2005), WIL is an educational process, service and experience with foundational pedagogy and theory. WIL courses are designed to blend theoretical concepts with practice based learning thereby enhancing capability of graduates to be innovative, productive and collaborative employees. Today WIL is becoming increasingly important at higher education institutions as employers are demanding for graduates who are 'work-ready'.

4. Types of WIL

There are various terms which are often used for WIL including work placements, field practices, professional practices and practical projects. WIL is a common term used to represent a range of pedagogical activities which are designed to enhance integration of theory into practice. WIL extends across a continuation from low to high levels of community engagement within on-campus and off campus paradigm. This can include instances where students are required to conduct work duties across various departments of a company for a short term period. WIL can also be delivered on-campus using simulations where universities can create real world workplace settings for students within the campus using equipments and tools that are standard in specific industries. Moreover, WIL may also be delivered off-campus through field experiences where students are exposed to real work environments. Rowe, Mackaway, & Winchester-Seeto (2012) conceptualized the various types of WIL as shown in Figure 1.

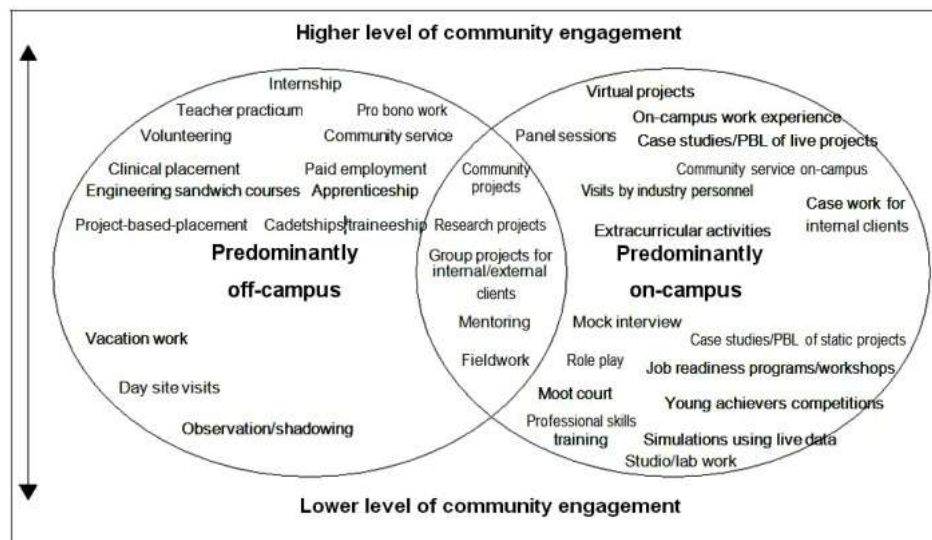


Figure 1. Exploration of contemporary WIL. Adapted from: (Rowe, Mackaway, & Winchester-Seeto, 2012)

5. Benefits of WIL

Smith (2012) pointed out that WIL can meet the needs of all the key stakeholders by providing better return on investment to students; creating work-ready graduates for employers, increasing student enrollment in universities due to better reputation in the market and enhancing national productivity by creating highly skilled workforce. A research in the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia illustrates that students with work integrated learning experience or a skill-development component during their course of study were more likely than others to reflect positivity on their university and successfully gained employment within their chosen field (Harvey et al, 1997).

In this section we have discussed the benefits of WIL for some of the key stakeholders namely: students, employers and the universities.

5.1 Benefits to Students

WIL provide students the opportunity to gain experience in their relevant field of study. WIL ensures that students are exposed to learning experiences by applying theoretical knowledge to practical tasks creating graduates who can have a direct entry into the labor market. A significant advantage of these students over non WIL students is that they have gained the experience to apply their disciplinary knowledge and skills in real workplace settings hence they can make more informed decisions. Moreover, graduates with WIL can start with higher starting salaries as they are well-equipped than non-WIL graduates. The process of blended on-campus learning with real workplace practices can help students to understand why certain topics within their course of study are more important than others. According to Allen & Peach (2007), students who have completed WIL courses are more able to put taught theories in the class into practical application. Moreover, some authors have also pointed out that those students who have undertaken WIL courses obtained higher grade point averages (Blair, Millea, & Hammer, 2004; Tanaka & Carlson, 2012). Moreover, some of the previous researchers reveal that there are many benefits of WIL for the students; the interpersonal communication skills of students are enhanced (Eames & Cates, 2011), student's ability to adapt improves (Freudenberg) and ability to make decisions is enhanced (Crebert, Bates, Vell, & Patrick, 2004). There is further evidence that WIL enhance students' ability to work within teams, achieve common goals and develop organizational skills. Some researchers also argue that WIL provide students an opportunity to develop their professional identity (Trede, 2012) and to get familiar with professional ethics and workplace values (Campbell & Zegwaard, 2011).

5.2 Benefits to Employers

Employers can gain significant advantages from being a part of WIL program. One benefit for the employer is that they can use students for carrying out some of their short-term technical tasks at low cost while providing students with valuable work experiences. By placing students in their companies as part of WIL program, employers can also monitor these students' performances and recruit promising students prior to their graduation. Some employers may also want to build strong relationship with some universities in order to enhance their corporate image in the community. Moreover, employers can also gain from the new students in their workplace as these students can bring

innovative ideas and fresh different perspectives.

5.3 Benefits to Universities

According to Ferns (2012) and Hodges (2011), partnerships with potential employers are the key to execute an authentic and inclusive learning experience. True benefits of higher education are only realized when learning experiences are connected to a real world context through dynamic partnership with external organizations. WIL programs will grant students the opportunity to enact the workplace norms and professional behavior while learning how to apply their on-campus knowledge in real-work settings. Today most universities in Bangladesh are trying to minimize the gap between employers' requirements of skills and the current graduates' skills. Hence universities are trying to build strong connections with relevant industries and seeking their collaborative support when designing their courses. Integration of work integrated learning programs at the universities can be a powerful tool to achieve this goal.

6. Prerequisites to Implement WIL at Tertiary Level in Bangladesh

6.1 Modify the Current Education System

At present the education system in Bangladesh is failing to understand the future of work demands which requires radical curriculum changes and quality shifts in teaching and learning practices to remain competitive (Islam, 2019). Learning outcomes should be aimed at developing the students' professional identity and abilities. In today's competitive world, the traditional graduation programs in Bangladesh need to be revamped and redesigned. Universities cannot only impart knowledge limited to text books but it is vital to offer job oriented courses and skill-based trainings to the students. According to Professor Abdul Mannan, the current job market in the country has become skill-driven. He further states that graduates should be equipped with the right set of skills to make them employable in the fast changing job market. For this reason, the current education system in the country needs to be revamp (Daily Star, May 11, 2019). Moreover, Professor Meshquat Uddin also points out that at present most of the universities do not offer work-oriented education as a result the number of unemployed graduates is increasing every year (Bari & Chowdhury, 2018).

6.2 Redesign the Courses

Courses should be designed in a way where strong emphasis is given to develop the students' understanding as to how they can apply their disciplinary knowledge in practical work settings. A recent study conducted on employability of college graduates in Bangladesh reveals that only one-third of employed graduates have been able to apply their higher education knowledge and skills in the workplace (Habib, 2019). According to Professor Abdul Mannan, "we don't need certificate-oriented graduates. The man and his knowledge and skills behind the certificate are what is important" (Daily Star, May 11, 2019). The universities must identify skills required by corporate bodies both at home and abroad to integrate these skills into their current curriculum. Students should be offered work-oriented courses which enable them to develop their skills and personal attributes so that they can confidently secure jobs in the competitive world market.

6.3 Identify the Needs of the Market

Curriculum designers should identify the needs of the market. To successfully implement the WIL programs, it is imperative for universities to establish and maintain continuous relationship with industry partners, keeping updated records, maintaining contacts with alumni and workplace supervisors. It is important to identify national skill shortages/gaps within every sector in a systematic fashion. According to Zahid Hussain, a lead economist at World Bank in Dhaka, the main reason for high unemployment in Bangladesh is the skill mismatch. He states that graduates lack the relevant skills which are required by the employers in the current job market. The employers in Bangladesh acknowledge that most graduates are strong in Bengali language but weak in English communication skills. Moreover, according to the findings of a recent study, more than half of the 235 employers interviewed stated that, universities should focus on improving problem-solving skills and team-working to improve the overall quality of graduates. They also want potential graduates to improve their ICT knowledge, English and communication skills (Habib, 2019).

6.4 Create Awareness

It is important for all universities in Bangladesh to create awareness among the teachers about the significance of generic skills in producing quality graduates. Teachers should be encouraged to integrate generic skills as part of their course assessment to ensure that students gain not only theoretical knowledge from books but also learn how to apply this knowledge in real world scenarios. Higher education institutions should conduct various seminars and workshops for faculty members to educate them on the concept of work integrated learning and the importance of developing the soft/generic skills of their students.

6.5 Build Strong Industry Connections

One vital factor which greatly influences the success of WIL program is for the universities to create strong links with relevant industry experts. A recent study where 235 employers in Bangladesh were interviewed, findings reveal that only 4 percent of the 235 employers have some type of relationship with colleges and universities. Having strong partnership with industries is pivotal in increasing employability of graduates (Habib, 2019). Today countries are regionally and globally connected hence it is vital for Bangladesh to produce quality graduates as inability to do so can lead to lucrative jobs being offered to people from other nations which eventually can lead to Bangladesh losing 3 to 5 billion dollars every year. According to Professor Syed Saad Andaleeb, roughly 50% of the graduates in Bangladesh are unemployed while \$5 billion worth of expertise is imported (Prothom Alo, June 18, 2018).

6.6 Proper Planning

WIL courses should provide students an experience of real work environment by allowing them to perform practical work. This type of real workplace experiences can be provided either within on-campus or an off-campus setting. If an academic institution wants to deliver this within their campus, then they must ensure that an authentic work environment is created for the students with complexities that match those in real workplace. Furthermore, teaching and learning activities as well as assessments should be based on the notion of integrative learning. For instance, most of the universities in Bangladesh use faculty evaluation for course assessment. However, these assessment tools are only designed to evaluate the disciplinary learning aspect taught in the class rather than finding out what generic skills students have gained through undertaking that specific course.

7. Conclusion

As Bangladesh is gradually emerging as an economy with progress, enhanced global mobility and fast economic productivity, it requires proficient, innovative and competitive workforce. Education is a key mechanism to prepare the existing population to meet the current demands of the dynamic job market. Work integrated learning is a new jargon that focuses attention on integration of disciplinary study with workplace practices. WIL can be a valuable instrument which can assist HEIs in Bangladesh to equip their graduates with required employability skills in order to function effectively in the competitive work environment. Universities need to introduce new work-oriented courses which will develop students' work experience and generic skills. This can be achieved through integration of WIL in the curriculum at the tertiary level in Bangladesh.

As discussed earlier, WIL encompasses many forms such as work placements, internships, field-work, job shadowing, sandwich-year-degrees and cooperative education. Hence universities must formulate short-term and long term plans prior to integration of WIL programs into their current curriculum. WIL can provide universities an opportunity to offer a better pay off for their students' investments in education. For instance, if a student wants to be a banker and hence he or she has selected Finance as a Major then WIL courses relevant to the banking sector should be offered to the student at the university. Typically, an undergraduate student in Bangladesh do not choose their major subjects in the initial years of their study, hence work oriented courses can be offered to the student in the later years. Furthermore, WIL can provide students with relevant experiences to develop their interpersonal skills, management skills, communication skills and other generic skills required to secure a job in the competitive world market. Thus, WIL program can ease the process of transferring skills from the universities to the workplace.

However, a critical element for the success of WIL is industry participation in the design and delivery of such programs. A collaborative approach with industry experts for the development of students' generic skills (Jackling & De Lange, 2009) is critical for successful implementation of WIL. The gap between education and employment should be closed through employer engagement in education and training. According to Britzman (2003), a mere experience of work is not enough to produce transformed learning. An effective WIL program requires partnership among diverse groups such as students, teachers, managers, professional bodies and career offices. To achieve success, it is imperative to recognize the needs of all the concerned parties and establish clear agreements between them. If the attainment of explicit mutual benefit fails for any one party, then the partnership may cease to be effective (Harvey et al., 1997).

Finally, the universities in Bangladesh need to take various steps to establish close links with potential employers. The higher academic institutions should conduct regular on-campus interviews, job fairs, walk-in-interviews which allow students to gain confidence in dealing with industry representatives. Universities can also organize Student-Industry Conferences where students can present projects or research papers relevant to their course of study to an audience of industry experts. Regular contacts should be maintained between academic supervisors and workplace supervisors. The primary purpose of such contact is typically to acquire feedback on students' learning in the workplace, identify students' shortcomings and other forms of weaknesses. Moreover, universities and other relevant bodies must carry out

extensive research to identify the lacking in the current curriculum and take effective measures to revamp the current education structure. Lastly, the Government of Bangladesh has a pivotal role to play in the form of assisting higher education institutions to address these potential challenges by providing them with appropriate funding and guidance.

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