



An Investigation to the Impact of Career Education, Interpersonal and IT Skills on Graduate Employability in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Lack of graduate employability has become a crucial phenomenon among higher education providers and employers in different countries. Previous studies found several attributes significant determinants in enhancing graduate employability. However, few studies relating to graduate employability have been examined in the context of Bangladesh, where a large number of students are gaining their graduation hats from public and private universities and other institutions every year. Hence, researchers aimed to examine the determinants of graduate employability in Bangladesh to shed light on this issue. Using the purposive sampling technique, survey data was collected from final year students and recent graduates. A total of 200 data was analysed using multiple linear regression. The results showed that career education and interpersonal and information technology (IT) skills significantly enhanced graduate employability. Discussions and implications of the findings have been articulated along with the concluding remarks at the end of the study.

Keywords: Graduate employability, Public university, Private university, Career education, Interpersonal skills and Information technology (IT) skills

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Introduction

Graduate employment patterns are deemed to have changed globally (Tran, 2016). A university degree is not sufficient for graduates to obtain employment in the competitive job market (Nunley, Pugh, Romero & Seals, 2017; Islam and Saif, 2020; Sisavath, 2021; Islam, Igwe, Rahman & Saif, 2021). The growth of unemployed university graduates implies a decline in education quality (Gale & Parker, 2017). In parallel, organisations reduce their workforces due to unstable and unpredictable business situations due to the COVID-19 pandemic and other external environmental factors (Shivoro et al., 2017; Islam, Igwe, Rahman & Saif, 2021). In addition, the workforce is swamped with graduates with parallel qualifications applying for graduate jobs (Porter, 2014; Shivoro et al.,

2017). As a result, job opportunities in the labour market have become flexible and highly competitive (Sisavath, 2021). These situations are caused by the enlargement of the higher education establishment, globalisation, and the growth of the global economy, influencing employers' recruitment requirements (Tran, 2016). Employers decide to recruit graduates based on their abilities and qualities and particular discipline's knowledge and skills (Shivoro et al., 2017). Hosain et al. (2021) argued that graduate employability is not anymore the concept that includes only the skills and attributes during the study period in higher education institutions. Still, it also consists of the university's academic reputation, communication skills, teamwork, problem-solving skills, and so on.

In these scenarios, students and universities have become concerned about the moving nature of employment shapes and integrates employability traits in graduate programme provision (Cai, 2013; Thirunavukarasu et al., 2020). This initiative has led researchers to explore the employability qualities sought by employers in a particular context. Thus, the concern of graduates' attributes by employers has received more attention (Donald et al., 2019; Pitan, 2016; Shivoro et al., 2017; Sisavath, 2021; Succi & Canovi, 2020). These studies demonstrated that employers' selection and recruitment procedures become more judicious and pose challenging requirements for graduates (Clarke, 2007; Hossain et al., 2020). Employers tended to emphasise generic and practical skills in the recruitment process instead of exploring academic results and technical expertise in Australia and Japan (Saito & Pham, 2019). There is no exception related to the Bangladesh context, a South Asian country. Despite many graduates in Bangladesh, they appear to be inadequately equipped with knowledge and skills for employment. Graduates have inadequate knowledge and skills as critical issues to attain employability. Thus, it is necessary to have employability skills such as basic literacy and interpersonal skills, IT skills and career education to enhance their employment scopes (Tang, 2019; Sharma, 2018).

Although graduate employability has become a crucial issue in Bangladesh, very few studies, have been found in the current literature examining the employability attributes that are important. Therefore, this study aims to investigate some effective skills that are needed for graduate employability in Bangladesh.

Literature Review

Graduate Employability

Higher education (HE) development has become a success story worldwide in the past three decades. Despite the reported mismatches in skills between HE and employers' requirements in some fields, universities are furthering employability credentials in the past 20 years, yet, employers are still complaining regarding the lack of preparation by graduates for work (Herbert et al., 2020). Hence, the definition of employability varies in the literature (Sisavath, 2021). Graduate employability is the accumulation of various abilities and skills that graduates obtain during their duties to gain a desirable job and become successful in their careers (Tomlinson, 2017). It refers to skills and abilities that individuals can use to attain employment, find a new job, fulfil employment requirements, and be satisfied with the designated career (Crossman & Clarke, 2010).

Similarly, Hillage and Pollard (1998) underlined the capability to help and retain employment when graduates seek a job. Graduates are anticipated to have information and skills required by employers and abilities to fulfil job requirements (Islam and Saif, 2020; Islam et al., 2021; Sharma, 2018). However, it is not always sure where graduates can use learned information and skills in their work due to the nature of work has reformed over time.

In light of this evidence, graduates' employability should be continually improved throughout their careers to mollify labour market requirements (Sisavath, 2021). Besides, graduate employability has been a crucial concern among university stakeholders especially graduates. Professional maturity, soft skills, problem-solving, continuous learning, and academic achievement secure a positive relationship with employer perceptions of graduate employability (Chhinzer & Russo, 2018). Some of these factors, i.e., skills or attributes or knowledge or institutional reputation, might influence different ways, but these significantly impact graduate employability (Jayasingha &

Suraweera, 2020; Mgaiwa, 2021). Another study suggests that the dispute on potential candidates' language proficiency for job employment has been crucial by potential employers for decades (Yoke et al., 2018). Idiosyncratically, basic literacy, interpersonal skills, IT skills and career education are essential to graduate employability.

Theoretical Background

The human capital theory (HCT) supports individuals' investment through education and training for economic prosperity. The human capital theory advocates that education and employment are the two most important determinants of individual earnings. Equalisation of education and employment opportunities equalise individual earnings (Mincer, 1974; Becker, 1993, as mentioned in Hossain and Tisdell, 2005). Consequently, HCT is profoundly associated with the higher education system, whereby higher education institutions have an embedded responsibility to develop understanding, knowledge and skills among the students (Almendarez, 2013). Meanwhile, human development can further be assessed from the individuals' views as students and professionals may improve their knowledge and skills from higher education institutions and participate in several training and development programs (Mahajan et al., 2022). The human capital theory posited that education and training are the drivers in improving the ability and productivity of humans (Eide & Showalter, 2010). Henceforth, Mgaiwa (2021) defined human capital as individuals with a collection of information, intelligence, skills, experiences, talent, abilities and judgement. It can be argued that education is the investment that aims to develop individuals to be more competent, productive and employable in the workforce. By developing knowledge and skills, graduates can enhance their employability opportunities and contribute in a broader way to the workforce (Nwajiuba et al., 2020). Human capital theory suggests that employability characterises how individuals improve their ability or capability to work and their desirability to the workforce. Thus, analysing a graduate's employability goes to the graduates themselves as they have to develop themselves with the knowledge and skills demanded by the employers.

Basic Literacy

Basic literacy is defined as reading, listening, speaking, writing, and performing the basic mathematical process (Rosenberg et al., 2012). Reading ability comprises the capability to understand written information, while writing refers to communicating in reports and letters (Shivoro et al., 2017). Basic mathematical skills lead to solving practical issues through numeracy techniques. In this regard, written communication is one of the soft, practical skills generally developed over time, especially in universities and other higher education institutions. However, graduates are often criticised due to their lack of verbal and non-verbal communication skills. For example, many of them cannot even write an email correctly, while many face difficulties exchanging ideas via face-to-face meetings or presentations (Ting et al., 2017). However, an employer will not be willing to recruit an individual if they lack communication skills because, without this skill, an individual cannot exchange ideas properly. That also falls under the basic literacy that applicants or graduates should pass as it will improve their employability (Belzer & Kim, 2018; Okolie et al., 2019). This is also further supported by the studies published during the COVID-19 pandemic period when basic literacy of computers and technologies, for example, digital capabilities, helped a lot of graduates and current employees to have jobs and stay in the job, respectively (Limniou, Varga-Atkins, Hands, & Elshamaa, 2021; Sato, Kang, Daigo, Matsuoka, & Harada, 2021). Thus, the hypothesis is developed as follows:

H1: Basic literacy has a significant positive effect on graduate employability.

Interpersonal Skills

Heckman and Kautz (2012) defined soft skills as the combination of personality traits, goals, preferences, and motivations demanded and valued in the labour market, at school, and in many other fields (Fernandes et al., 2021). Similarly, soft skills are the cluster of personal habits, attitudes, qualities, and social graces that make an individual a good employee and a companionable co-worker

(Indeed, 2021). In this regard, interpersonal skills adopted from soft skills generated from attitudes, cultural practices, and experiences defined the capability to adapt to the environment. Besides, interpersonal skills comprise the ability to work in teams, assist others in learning, deliver customer service, convey agreements, sort out differences, and work in a diverse organisation (Rosenberg et al., 2012; Calvo & García, 2021). In other words, graduates' aptitude to relay positively with other team members of the group, corroborate other team members' learning, handle conflicts, and perform well in a socially diverse environment (Shivoro et al., 2017).

Further, it also comprises the capability to work comfortably with team members at different firm levels. Employers in the modern era examine the soft skills among the applicants for a particular, and these are the non-cognitive abilities essential for employers to build a productive relationship (Ibrahim et al., 2017). Thus, the hypothesis is developed as follows:

H2: Interpersonal skills have a significant positive effect on graduate employability.

IT Skills

In this competitive world, technological skills are essential to adapt to the rapidly changing work context (Nawaz, 2020). For example, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the traditional working processes into automation in many organisations. Employers in the present era require employers to have technological skills because the jobs are being integrated with technologies (Mansour & Dean, 2016). IT skills comprise the capability to select procedures, tools and equipment to evaluate and acquire data (Rosenberg et al., 2012). Hence, graduates' ability to use technology contributes to the effective execution of work referred to as the IT skills of graduates (Shivoro et al., 2017). It comprises using computer applications and devices to execute and communicate tasks. This study argues that IT skills play a significant role in graduate employability. Jayasingha and Suraweera (2020) found that technological skills, for example, IT skills contribute to the development of the applicants' employability. Employers assume that employees with better technical skills can contribute to the development of the virtual team, which is required in terms of the crisis (Sato et al., 2021; Zuma, 2021). Thus, the hypothesis is developed as follows:

H3: IT skills have a significant positive effect on graduate employability.

Career Education

Career education consists of planned experiences designed to facilitate the development of self-awareness, decision learning, transition learning and opportunity awareness in students (Watts, 2006). In support, Hillage and Pollard (1998) proposed two crucial elements of employability linked to career education: presentation and deployment skills. Presentation skills refer to the capabilities of demonstrating employability properties and presenting them to employers. Deployment is how graduates are aware of their abilities and utilise them (Hillage & Pollard, 1998). Nevertheless, many students do not seriously think about their potential careers nor seek assistance until graduation (Pitan & Olugbenga Adedeji, 2014). In this circumstance, higher education institutions should carry out more strategies to affirm students' involvement with career education from earlier in their university experience (Pitan, 2016; Mgaiwa, 2021; English et al., 2021). It is because career education contributes to the development of graduate employability (Ojala et al., 2021; García-Aracil et al., 2021). Moreover, career education also improves a graduate's knowledge of what employers want and motivates them to prepare according to employers' demands that eventually develop their employability (Clarke, 2018; Zuma, 2021; Abdullah, 2022). Therefore, this study argues that career education is one of the crucial determinants of graduate employability. Thus, the hypothesis is developed as follows:

H4: Career education has a significant positive effect on graduate employability.

Methodology

This study employed a survey method to collect data for empirical investigation. Survey questionnaires were adopted from Pitan (2016) and Rosenberg et al. (2012), encompassing 27 items, and was distributed to graduates from universities in Bangladesh. The survey questionnaires include demographic inquiries, and a five-point Likert scale was used to gather responses. The sampling used a purposeful technique to select graduates seeking jobs and final year students in Bangladesh. The data was collected using Google's online survey form due to the restrictions in movement caused by COVID-19. Graduates returned a total of 204 survey data.

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 25. The normality of data was analysed based on skewness and kurtosis, followed by reliability test with Cronbach's alpha. Henceforward, the demographic backgrounds of respondents and the descriptive statistics were analysed. Finally, the Pearson correlation analysis was carried out to identify the relationships between variables. Finally, regression analysis was performed to find the effect of independent variables on the dependent variable as the following equation;

$$y (GE) = a + \beta_1(BT) + \beta_2InS + \beta_3IT + \beta_4CE \dots\dots (1)$$

Note: *GE= graduate employability, BT= basic literacy, InS= Interpersonal Skills, IT = Information Technology, CE=career education, a = constant*

Results and Interpretations

Demographic Backgrounds

Table 1 displays the demographic backgrounds of respondents to this study. Based on the results, 200 respondents participated in the survey, while 102 were from the public, 80 from the private, and 18 from national universities studying or graduating. Of these 200 respondents, 137 were male and 63 females in the range of 18-35 years. 60% of respondents fall in the field of 18-25 years old, 35.5% between 26-30 years, and only 4.5% fall between 31-35 years. Meanwhile, 138 graduates are studying or graduated in a bachelor's degree while 61 have a Master's. Only one student is pursuing a Ph.D. among the respondents, 30.5% are from an Arts & Commerce background, 46.5% from science, 9% from technology (CSE, IT), 5.5% from engineering field and 8.5% mentioned other fields of study.

Table 1: Demographic Backgrounds

Components		Frequency	Percentage (%)
university	Public	102	51
	Private	80	40
	National	18	9
Gender	Male	137	68.5
	Female	63	31.5
Age	18-25	120	60
	26-30	71	35.5
	31-35	9	4.5
Level of education	Bachelor	138	69
	Master	61	30.5
	Ph.D.	1	0.5

Field of study	Arts & Commerce	61	30.5
	Science	93	46.5
	Technology (IT, CSE)	18	9
	Engineering	11	5.5
	Other	17	8.5

Note: total respondents (N)=200

Descriptive Statistics

The normality of data was confirmed by determining the values of skewness and kurtosis, where all the statistical values fell between -3 and +3. Upon confirmation of the normality of the data, the reliability test was performed through Cronbach's alpha. The results indicated that the reliability of data was ensured since Cronbach's alpha is more significant than 0.7. Table 2 presents the results of reliability and descriptive statistics. The results demonstrated an average value of 4 for graduate employability. It refers that students being aware of graduate employability and the recruiters' requirements. Hence, respondents posited an approximate average of 4 for the essential literacy variable. That means most students believed to have basic literacy to fulfil recruiters' requirements.

Similarly, more than four mean values were unveiled for interpersonal skills that consider the high confidence level of graduates to work in a team and communicate effectively in the workforce. However, the mean values for IT skills and Career education were less than 4. Although both considered close to 4 deals, they thus demonstrated considerable skills and knowledge in career education. Overall, respondents posited a good graduate attributes level.

Table 2: Descriptive and Reliability Scores

Variables	Mean	Std. Dev.	α
Basic Literacy	3.96	.79	.85
Interpersonal Skills	4.20	.65	.86
IT Skills	3.93	.70	.89
Career Education	3.86	.74	.82
Graduate employability	4.07	.72	.79

Note: Std. Dev. = standard deviation, α = Cronbach's alpha

Correlation

Pearson correlation analysis was performed to identify the correlations between variables: basic literacy, interpersonal skills, IT skills, career education, and graduate employability. The Pearson correlation analysis was performed through the bivariate method in SPSS. The results are displayed in Table 3. The results demonstrated a significant correlation ($p < 0.05$) between basic literacy and interpersonal skills. Similarly, interpersonal skills and IT skills depicted a significant relationship.

Meanwhile, IT skills and career education are significantly correlated; thus, career education is significantly correlated to graduate employability. All the relationships display a significant correlation in the model. These results defined the importance of hierarchical factors linked to the theoretical model. This study presented a dependent variable, namely graduate employability, and it proved that career education is the most crucial determinant, followed by IT skills, interpersonal skills and basic literacy.

Table 3: Pearson Correlation Results

Variables		Grad. Emp.	Basic_Ilt	Career	Int.Per	IT_Skill
Grad. Emp.	Pearson Correlation	1	.581**	.773**	.658**	.677**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.000	.000
Basic_Ilt	Pearson Correlation	.581**	1	.537**	.684**	.672**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000	.000	.000
Career	Pearson Correlation	.773**	.537**	1	.628**	.698**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000		.000	.000
Int.Per	Pearson Correlation	.658**	.684**	.628**	1	.626**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000		.000
IT_skill	Pearson Correlation	.677**	.672**	.698**	.626**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Regression & Hypothesis Testing

Multiple regression analysis was performed to assess the regression weights (β) in the theoretical equation 1. Regression weights represent the unit of each IV (independent variable) change while other variables remain unchanged against one unit of change in DV (dependent variable). Meanwhile, constant weight defines the weight of DV without the effects of IVs in the model. Table 4 presents the results of regression weights for the theoretical model. The results show a value of 0.66 for R^2 , and 0.65 for adjusted R^2 , while the difference is small. Besides, the F-value (96.53) is statistically significant at a 99.99% confidence level, which posits that the model has significant regression weights between DV and IVS. Consequently, the results predicted 0.412 regression weight for DV ($p < 0.05$) and 0.067 for basic literacy ($p > 0.05$), 0.215 for interpersonal ($p < 0.05$), 0.157 for IT skills ($p < 0.05$), and 0.485 for career education ($p < 0.05$).

Table 4: Multiple Regression Analysis Results

Variable	R^2	Adjusted R^2	F	β	p-value
Graduate employability	.66	.65	96.53	.412	.045
Basic literacy				.067	.239
Interpersonal				.215	.000
IT skills				.157	.002
Career education				.485	.022

The regression results exposed that H1 (basic literacy to graduate employability) is not supported. It means basic literacy is not considered a significant factor in graduate employability. However, interpersonal skills demonstrated a statistically significant positive relationship. Nevertheless, IT skills posited a similar finding; thus, H2 and H3 are supported. Consequently, H4 is also supported, and it is exhibited as the strongest attribute to enhancing graduate employability.

Discussion and Implications

The study's findings strengthen the arguments regarding the significance of interpersonal skills, IT skills and career education for graduate employability. Interpersonal skills are developed from socialisation and teamwork in and out of the classroom. Therefore, it plays a vital role in enhancing employability. Interpersonal skills are the tendency and qualities to respond and deal with the interviews and challenging situations (Rosenberg et al., 2012). Furthermore, the study results affirm that IT skills are time-demanding skills. Whether the graduates' discipline is either related to not related to IT, they must develop the skill for their greater employability (Islam et al., 2021; Zuma, 2021). Recruiters expect all graduates to have basic and advanced IT skills that can be useful in every aspect of their career. As a result, IT skills might be considered the primary determinant of graduate employability.

According to the results, we can see that career education posited a significant relationship with graduate employability. Therefore, it notably presents its importance to enhance graduate employability like past findings (Hillage & Pollard, 1998; Pitan, 2016; Pool & Sewell, 2007). This empirical finding unveiled crucial implications for universities and students. For instance, universities should engage students through functional career services units that will help deliver self-reliant and better-informed students with career plans (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021; Yorke, 2004; Clarke, 2018). Furthermore, a career-related course can be embedded for final year students demonstrating the planning and procedures to be employed and required skills (Pitan, 2016). Finally, our results are consistent with the previous results that career education is one of the core determinants to enhance graduate employability (Ojala et al., 2021; Abdullah, 2022). However, basic literacy is expected to be a common phenomenon for graduates, but this has not been found as a significant factor in Bangladesh. In this regard, it can be argued that recruiters might not put basic literacy as an important factor during the recruitment process, and students find it common for all university students. Therefore, basic literacy was not found as a significant attribute in enhancing graduate employability.

Overall, the outcomes of the study have both literature and practical implications. Firstly, the study's findings advance our understanding of some under research antecedents of graduate employability, such as basic literature, career education, information technology, and interpersonal skills. In this regard, the findings enrich the current literature relating to graduate employability. The results of the study can also be beneficial for the practitioners, university policymakers, education ministries of different countries, especially Bangladesh and eventually for the graduates in developing graduate employability. The universities should take the idea that students should be given career-related education to establish themselves according to the current and future employers' demands.

Moreover, the respective policymakers can develop policies that would effectively develop the students' IT skills, interpersonal skills and other skills so that they can be more employable and contribute to the workplace. In this regard, the universities should have extracurricular activities, especially courses or programs that should offer interpersonal skills, career education, IT skills, etc. This approach in the universities will improve the employability of graduates and develop the reputation of universities. Finally, both current students and graduate of the various universities must improve their information technology (IT), career-related knowledge or education, and interpersonal skills to be more employable.

Concluding Remarks and Future Research Directions

This study was carried out to examine the factors that enhance employability in Bangladeshi graduates. Multiple linear regression analysis was performed on survey data to investigate the theoretical model of this study. The findings revealed that career education is the most crucial factor in enhancing graduate employability. Hence, interpersonal and IT skills significantly enhance graduate employability while basic literacy depicted an insignificant effect. The findings of this study may enable the authorities of Bangladeshi higher education institutions to measure their curriculum designs to gauge gaps in development and areas for further improvement. Meanwhile, undergraduate

students will be aware and expected to make conscious efforts to seek ways of involving learning within and outside of the university system. Thus, they can develop and acquire employability skills necessary to gather competitive advantage and fulfil the current job market requirements.

However, the study has some limitations that should be considered before generalisation in all contexts. First of all, the study had only gathered data online and was unable to capture a large number of students in different locations. Further, the COVID-19 restrictions did not allow the collection of physical survey responses. However, future studies might gather the data in large volumes and collect it physically. Furthermore, this study only considered four determinants, while past studies posited more determinants that enhance graduate employability, which can also be argued to be a limitation of the study. Therefore, future studies should adopt more relevant and contemporary variables to enrich the current literature and advance our understanding of graduate employability.

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