

Summary

Follow-Up Tracer Study on Graduates of Tertiary-Level Colleges

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Human resources play an important role in the overall development of a country. It is an incontrovertible fact that human capital remained the most important factor of production in the 21st century. Education has a major role to play in human resource development. Therefore, every country attaches a greater premium on the viability and sustainability of its education to human resource development. To fulfill the human development needs of the country, a baseline study on tertiary-level colleges was conducted in 2017 to provide a snapshot of the current situation of tertiary college education with a special focus on the relevance and external efficiency as well as quality of education. Based on this the first round Tracer Study on Graduates of Tertiary-Level Colleges was conducted.

The Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) conducted the first-round tracer study on graduates of tertiary-level colleges in 2021 to trace the graduates from a sample of NU-affiliated tertiary colleges and to assess the labor market outcome and relevance of the tertiary colleges. The students who graduated (Degree/Honors/Masters programs) in 2017 have been chosen from a sample of NU-affiliated tertiary colleges.

BIDS conducted the Follow-up Tracer Study in May-June 2023 with a new cohort of graduates, students, teachers, and employers to assess how college graduate job market outcomes have changed. The follow-up tracer study assesses the overtime labor market relevance of tertiary college-level education. It also analyses the contribution of tertiary education to developing a highly-skilled, well-educated workforce and accelerated job creation in Bangladesh.

The survey focuses on the following aspects. (i) in-depth assessments of labor market outcomes and economic activities of graduates; (ii) current students' socio-economic backgrounds, motivation, financing agreements and perceptions on college education, market relevance of college education; (iii) training and employers' views on post-secondary education; (iv) analysis of challenges in education quality and relevance of college education; and (v) recommendation for future policy direction for improving the quality and relevance of the tertiary college sub-sector.

For this study, the data were collected from a randomly selected representative sample of graduates and students. The sampling was done through a stratified multi-stage random sampling technique. The stratification categories include (1) ownership (government or non-government) (2) College Type (Honors or Masters), and (3) Geographical area (all administrative divisions). The sampling frame of colleges (primary sampling unit) includes all government or non-government Honors and Masters Colleges affiliated with the NU that have at least 150 new intakes in Honors Courses. Colleges and departments that were newly affiliated in the past five years will be excluded as they may still have a limited number of graduates.

According to the National University ICT Unit (2018), there were around 608 colleges that meet this criterion. The population for the study thus ended at around 608 colleges under the NU with Honors and Master's programs. For the purpose of this study, a total of 61 colleges (using a 10 percent sample) were selected with 17 government and 44 non-government colleges.

The survey was designed in a mixed method approach of both quantitative and qualitative to address the objectives. According to the Terms of Reference (ToR), the sample consists of four groups of respondents, i.e., college principals, students, graduates, and current employers of NU graduates. Four sets of structured questionnaires have been prepared for the graduates, current students, principals, and the current employers of the National University graduates. We aimed to survey (actually surveyed) 1340 (1345) graduates and 675 students from the 61 sample colleges; 61 principals from each of the colleges along with 100 (107) employers. To complement the quantitative surveys, qualitative approaches were employed including focus group discussions (FGDs) with students, teachers, and key informant interviews (KIIs) of the employers.

Graduate Employability of NU-Affiliated Colleges

A total of 1345 graduates' information has been collected under this study. They are either currently active graduates or not active in the labor force. It is found that the majority of graduates are active in the labor force (91 percent). It is necessary to mention that the percentage of the total labor force for male graduates is higher than that of female graduates, i.e., 96 percent and 84 percent respectively.

A total of 879 graduates are employed in our survey with the male is 652 and female is 227. This reflects the employment rate is 71.76 including 80 percent male and 65.69 female. On the other hand, a total of 346 graduates are found to be unemployed providing 97 male and 249 female graduates. Therefore, the average unemployment rate turns to be 28.24 percent including 19.96 percent male and 34.31 female. This result shows that employment outcomes differ significantly across genders. A much higher share of male graduates is employed compared to their female counterparts.

Among the employed graduates, wage employment is the main form of employment. Only 16.2 percent of graduates are currently being engaged in self-employment. What is most striking is that more than one-fourth of the graduates (28.24 percent) are still unemployed and looking for jobs, even after spending three to four years since first graduating from their colleges.

In tracer study (2021), the current status of employments of graduates shows that 21 percent graduates are salaried employed, while 66 percent are unemployed; 1.5 percent are self-employed and 7 percent are involved in full-time/part-time study. On the other hand, using the same definition, follow-up tracer study results shows that 28.73 percent graduates are salaried employed, while 47.91 percent are unemployed; 10.93 percent are self-employed, 12.40 percent are involved in full-time/part-time study.

The disaggregated picture from tracer study (2021) shows that the proportion of females among salaried graduates is 11.64 percent, while it is 30.74 percent for males; the proportion of

females not in the labor force is 9 percent which is only 0.6 percent for males. But the proportion of unemployed females and female graduates in part-time/full-time study are higher than unemployed males and male graduates (70.3% vs 61%; 8.55% vs 5.14%). However, in follow up tracer study (2023) unemployment rate among the male graduates has decreased considerably comparing with Tracer study (2021). More male graduates are engaged in self-employed activities and are involved in further study to increase their job opportunities.

This result shows that employment outcomes differ significantly across gender. A much higher share of male graduates is employed compared to their female counterparts. After three years of graduation, more than one fourth of the graduates are still unemployed. This share is very high compared to the labor market outcome of the general population. According to the Labour Force Survey 2016–2017, the unemployment rate among those with tertiary education qualifications was 11.2 percent, which was much higher than the national average of 4.2 percent in 2017. The unemployment rate for females stands at 34.31 percent, which is nearly two times higher than that of males (19.96 percent). This level of unemployment is extremely concerning and raises serious concerns about willingness to search job and skills to manage job among the college graduates in Bangladesh.

Labor Market Outcome and Economic Activities of Graduates

We have interviewed 1345 graduates coming from 61 colleges across all administrative divisions of Bangladesh. These graduates come from four types of colleges under the National University affiliation: Government-Honors (GH), Non-Government Honors (NGH), Government Masters (GM), and Non-Government Masters (NGM).

For graduates from government honor's colleges, 38.2% of graduates are salaried employed, 18.7% are self-employed, 13.7% are graduates with part-time work and study, and 29.4% are unemployed. For graduates from Government Master's colleges, 41.4% are salaried employed, 11.2% are self-employed, 19.8% are graduates with part-time study and working, and 27.6% are unemployed. Combining Government Honor's and Master's, 40% of graduates are salaried employed, 14.4% are self-employed, 17.2% are graduates with part-time study and working, and 28.4% are unemployed. Among Non-Government Honors graduates, 47.1% are salaried employed, 18.2% are self-employed, 9.5% are graduates with part-time study and working, and 25.1% are unemployed. In the case of Non-Government Master's graduates, 27.3% are salaried employed, 17.3% are self-employed, 8.2% are graduates with part-time study and working, and 47.3% are unemployed. When considering all graduates, irrespective of college type of the surveyed graduates, 42.28% are salaried employed, 16.2% are self-employed, 13.2% are graduates with part-time study and working, and 28.2% are unemployed.

Graduates who are unemployed, majority of them graduate from BA (pass) course, Political science, Library Management, Bangla, and Islamic history and culture. On the other hand, English, Economics, Accounting, Sociology and Finance and Banking graduates are less unemployed.

A majority (52%) of total unemployed graduates stated that they do not have any definite time span for searching for a job while 24% of them search for a job almost every day and 9.6%

search for jobs several times a week. Almost 60% of the unemployed graduates surveyed seem to have been unemployed for more than two years after graduation.

Most of the surveyed unemployed graduates spend most of their time searching for a job (45.74%), though the activity has a higher frequency among the graduates from government colleges (52.04% of the government college graduates compared to 39.82% of non-government colleges). Apart from that, most of them also spend almost an equal amount of time helping their family with the household chores. This indicates that they want to be useful and prefer helping their families to do anything else or being idle.

Among the salaried employers, almost 60 percent of NU graduates have been working in private enterprises, where graduates from non-government colleges seem higher in this sector by 3 percent than graduates from government colleges (i.e., 60.94 and 58.33 respectively). In general, in the government sector, there are more graduate employees from NU-affiliated government colleges than non-government colleges. On the contrary, graduates from non-government colleges are more likely to engage in NGO/Trust or Foundation.

For self-employed activities, 27 percent of graduates have been engaged in wholesale and retail trade and the other 14 percent of graduates are in the agriculture, forestry, or fishing industry. More NU-affiliated govt. college graduates are involved in the garment, food processing, education, and health sectors compared to non-govt. graduates. While, on the other hand, more non-govt. college graduates are involved in the sectors of manufacturing, construction, ICT, E-commerce, and restaurant and food services

It is evident that, graduates who are still studying with some sort of part-time work, around 44% of the graduates enrolled in the study after graduation or post-graduation with the intention of getting a better job. 22% of the graduates perceive that an undergraduate degree is not adequate to get an expected job, and hence they decided to pursue advanced studies. 19.80% surmised that they would need some kind of technical skill for a better job and enrolled in part-time study whereas, 11.17% enrolled because of their parents' wishes.

There is a need for other training for graduates' employability. Overall, 43.7% of graduates among our surveyed ones did not receive any kind of additional training, 24.9% received skill development training while they were studying the college, 19.8% received skill development training after they left college and 11.5% received skill development training such as information and communication technology (ICT) training, technical/vocational training, basic computer skill training etc. before they started their tertiary education. Though most graduates from government colleges did not get any training before starting college, their share (compared to the graduates of non-government colleges) of getting training increased while they were in college and after they finished their college education.

Graduates have been asked if they feel that need for any training opportunities in their respective colleges to make them more capable of getting jobs. It is found that almost 43 percent of unemployed graduates demanded training needs. Graduates have stated the need for specific training courses where it is found that all categories of graduates need mostly Information, Communication, and Technology training (ICT).

Current Students' Socio-Economic Backgrounds, Motivation, Perceptions, and Market Relevance of College Education

Affiliated colleges of the NU in Bangladesh serve secondary graduates of average academic qualifications from decent family backgrounds to achieve tertiary education qualifications. Most students in the survey perceive themselves to hail from lower-middle-class families (73%), followed by belonging to upper-middle-class families (13.95%) and poor families (10.83%). Most students in the NU colleges have parents with primary and secondary education. Government colleges have a higher percentage of students with parents who have lower levels of education (no institutional education, primary education), whereas non-government colleges have a higher percentage of students with parents who have attained higher education levels (Honors and Masters).

Overall, among 675 students, 33.92% students study arts, 28.14% students study business, 22.96% study social science and 14.96% study science. The study findings show the variations in the distribution of students across academic disciplines, highlighting differences in program preferences and enrollments among males and females.

It is evident that current students try to engage themselves in some kind of activities to generate income. 44.30% of students from all surveyed colleges have some kind of employment at present with an average earning of BDT. 6657. 50.83% of the students at Masters colleges and 41.90% of the students of Honors colleges are involved in employment while earning BDT. 7782.61 and BDT. 6157.01 on average respectively. The working hours are almost 5 per day for all students. Students are also involved in different co-curriculum activities e.g., debating, sports, and cultural activities, student council, etc. 31% of all students at different colleges, 32.2% of students in government colleges, and 30.2% of students in non-government colleges take part in co-curriculum activities according to our survey data.

About the fruitfulness of their college education, government and non-government colleges differ significantly in terms of students' perception regarding the adequacy of knowledge and technical skills learned for future work. Government colleges have a lower mean agreement score (2.76) compared to non-government colleges (3.21). This difference is statistically significant, indicating that students in non-government colleges have a more positive view of the relevance of their education to their future work.

Among the students of all colleges, only 13.3% said they have career counseling services on their college premises. The percentage is higher for students at non-government colleges. However, students at all types of colleges think that there should be a career counseling service at every college

Overall, the data suggests that students in non-government colleges tend to have more positive perceptions of the education and resources provided by their institutions, particularly regarding the relevance of their education to future work and access to technology and research materials

Challenges in Education Quality and Relevance of College Education

About 69 percent of college principals from NU-affiliated non-government colleges think that the college programs are adequate enough to prepare the graduates for the labor market. On the other hand, only 52 percent of principals from government colleges think that the quality of education is good enough to prepare the graduates for the labor market. However, according to them only 17 percent of the graduates get their expected job on completion. They have to wait almost 2 years to get the desired job.

The principals stated some subjects they taught which have very low demand in the job market. It's one of the prime barriers in the job market to get a suitable job if they didn't learn job-oriented subjects. Subjects like History, Islamic History and Culture, Philosophy, Sanskrit, Political Science, Bangla, etc. are not competent enough compared to ICT/Business or Science-related subjects, which are most demanding in the labor market.

When the principals were asked about the mentioned skills that are being covered by the offered course curriculum, half of them stated that Bangla communication (overall 54.2 percent) is widely used in lectures or daily conversation. Here, non-govt. colleges have covered more sophisticated Bengali language than govt. colleges i.e., 54.5 percent and 53.6 percent respectively. Apart from that, non-govt. colleges have covered other skills higher than govt. colleges such as time management (33.7 percent), basic computer skills (33.5 percent), and presentation skills (35.9 percent).

Teachers provide a huge contribution (overall 79 percent), to the students about how to search for jobs appropriately, job sources, CV writing, tips about interviews, etc. NU affiliated non-govt. colleges have higher support facilities compared to govt. colleges (i.e., 83.3 percent and 71.4 percent respectively). Job search by different social media/websites (63.2 percent) and career counseling (57.9 percent) also contributed students to getting a particular job.

Besides, almost 42 percent of colleges provide additional skills training to their graduates, where the govt. and non-govt. colleges differ by 5 percent (45 percent and 40 percent respectively). Some of the Principals reported providing limited job placement facilities to the students through career counseling and advice, job fairs, and career seminars or workshops. However, these colleges neither have any job placement unit for graduates nor any staff assigned to provide the service.

On the other hand, keeping track of graduates is not a common practice among the colleges. However, college principals reported tracking the graduates mainly through personal networks and communication.

Collaboration with the industry is relatively low among the sampled colleges. The colleges reported to have some industry collaboration through only workplace visits by students. Only 6.6 percent of the college principals reported having some kind of collaboration with the industry.

According to the principals, students' unemployment rate is more severe than other existing problems, where govt. colleges have to face more student unemployability than non-govt. Other existing problems such as the absence of career clubs in the National University, difficulties in finding employer partners, lack of operating funds, lack of training opportunities for teachers, and absence of students are major issues in the surveyed colleges.

Employers' Views on Post-Secondary Education

Most of the employers, stated they recruit the graduates based on qualifications not based on institutes. Nevertheless, almost every employer reported that their establishment has a special interest in recruiting NU graduates. These employers were asked about the different reasons why their institution considered recruiting NU graduates. The best reason is they do not switch jobs frequently (91%) and have enthusiasm for working with a low salary (84%).

A major proportion of the NU Graduates are working as teachers or assistant teachers (36%). Apart from that, 16% of employees are working as officers or assistant officers in different government and non-government organizations, 14% of employees are working as supervisors, coordinators or field officers and the rest are in other professions.

It is clear that despite a majority of employers stating that their institution has a particular interest in hiring NU graduates, 63% of employers said that NU graduates in current posts are not difficult to replace. Only 2% of employers stated that it is very difficult to fill their posts where NU graduates are currently in employment.

For most of the employers assessed (38%), it will take more than a week but less than a month to fill up the position if a vacancy occurs where NU graduates are currently employed. 38% of employers also reported it will take more than a month actually. Only 4% of employers stated that they would fill the position immediately if a vacancy occurred where NU graduates are currently employed.

According to the employers, ICT (90%), English Language (90%), Communication (78%), Problem-solving (75%), and Teamwork (61%) are the most important areas that universities should train students in. That means employers value soft skills in addition to academic qualifications and would like the colleges to strengthen training in ICT, communication, and language skills. College graduates are strong in Bangla, possess suitable work attitudes, and team working skills. By improving ICT skills and English language and communication skills, college graduates may position themselves in a better position in the job market and fill in a good share of the skills gap that exists in the workforce.

Facilitating the Employability of NU Graduates

The quest to improve the employability of graduates from National University (NU) colleges yielded a multitude of valuable insights from discussions conducted on various fronts:

Firstly, participants emphasized the significance of internship programs, specifically within sectors like food industries and banking, as vital avenues to bolster students' employability prospects. These internship opportunities were regarded as practical pathways for students to gain a foothold in the job market and reduce future unemployment rates.

The value of alumni associations emerged as a powerful resource in enhancing employability. These associations have been envisioned as platforms for current students to communicate with alumni, seek job opportunities in companies where alumni were employed, and receive

invaluable guidance on various aspects of job-seeking, from interviews to examinations. Alumni were also seen as potential sources of motivation and mentors who could provide insights into navigating careers effectively. However, the absence of an alumni association in some cases was noted as a missed opportunity to tap into this valuable resource.

The significance of job fairs was also highlighted. Participants stressed that job fairs could only be effective if they offered comprehensive services and guidance. The regular organization of such fairs, free from corruption, was crucial to benefit students. Regrettably, most colleges lacked arrangements for job fairs, depriving students of the opportunity to learn about companies, available job roles, application procedures, and more.

Lastly, there was a unanimous call for structured career counseling services within colleges. These services were deemed essential to guide students in securing suitable jobs, keeping them informed about the job market landscape, various job types, and working environments, and preparing them effectively for their career journeys. The inclusion of compulsory technical courses like English courses, and basic computer and ICT courses would also help the students to grow their soft skill sets.

Recommendations

This study highlights some issues for improvement in the overall teaching and learning environment of NU-affiliated colleges. (i) Increase the use of ICT in teaching, provide ICT skills training, and upgrade ICT facilities: Teachers need to acquire ICT knowledge quickly to guide their students wherever appropriate. For example, digital skill development courses or ICT training courses deserve priority as reflected in graduates, current students, and employers' opinions. (ii) Training for the NU teachers is highly recommended: Teachers need to be well trained alongside training abroad. Arrangement of training before the process of teacher recruitment and Long-term subject-based training and pedagogical training should be arranged for the teachers for quality teaching. (iii) Conduct periodic institution-level graduate tracking. (iv) Set up job placement support services and carrier counseling within colleges. (v) Job fairs should be organized every year, preferably at the district level, to facilitate industry collaboration. (vi) Encourage greater student enrollment in more market-demanded courses such as economics, accounting, mathematics, management, and statistics in the NU-affiliated colleges. (vii) Introducing short course facilities can increase the job market opportunities of the NU-affiliated colleges. (ix) As the graduate reported to have a lack of English language and communication skills, by improving those college graduates may position themselves in a better position in the job market. (x) The value of alumni associations emerged as a powerful resource in enhancing employability. Strengthening these associations has been envisioned as platforms for current students to communicate with alumni, seek job opportunities in companies where alumni were employed, and receive invaluable guidance on various aspects of job-seeking, from interviews to examinations. (xi) Most tertiary education academic programs do not provide students with the opportunities to gain practical exposure to their field of study. Therefore, practical assessments through presentations, teamwork, research, and internships should be included in academia to evaluate students' performance.