

Appraising the gap in Business Educators' and Employers' perceptions regarding Business Graduate skills: A study on the BBA graduates of Bangladesh Open University

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ABSTRACT

In past decades, Bangladeshi universities have produced trivial number of employable business graduates who are creative, target driven, able to work under pressure and have adequate communications and active learning skills. Studies suggest that many of them also lack sufficient business acumen, leadership and negotiation skills and the ability to think critically and behave ethically at work. This study aims to explore the gap in the perceptions of Bangladeshi Business educators and the perceptions of local employers along the mentioned employability skills as possessed by the graduates of Bangladesh Open University's (BOU) BBA program. A structured questionnaire was designed using google form and distributed among the respondents through email and other free messaging apps like WhatsApp and Messenger. One group of respondents, which involved thirty-five BBA educators from different universities across the country revealed their perceptions exclusively regarding BOU-BBA graduates' possession of the cited skills. The other group surveyed included twenty-five local employers who rated the extent to which they felt BBA graduates of the university possessed the stated skills. Data was collected online and analyzed using SPSS 23 software. The study shed light on the ever-widening perceptual gap existing between the educator and employer groups and suggested scope for fostering skill development in BOU classrooms to ensure the employability of Bangladeshi youths.

Keywords: Employability, skill development, BOU.

INTRODUCTION

Though the government of Bangladesh has brought by a number of remarkable changes in the field of tertiary education, a huge gap still persists between the knowledge learnt in university classrooms and the skills sought by employers. Emulti (2004) felt that the persisting gap was actually between the practice and theory or in other words, between employers' requirements and what was taught in classrooms. Every year a mounting number of youths graduate with a BBA degree from different business schools across the country. BBA or Bachelor of Business Administration is a full-time program under the study area of Business education that spans through a 4-year period of undergraduate life. Bangladesh Open University, launched its BBA

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program in 2007 and since then it has been operating with the mission to create educated and skilled manpower throughout the country by making business education available to all. In line with its mission, the university felt the necessity to take a true skilled based approach to Business education with a view to producing employable graduates for local and global job markets. Salman (2022) extracted the quotes of AKM Fahim Mashroor, CEO of Bdjobs (the largest online job searching site of Bangladesh) who posited that BBA is becoming largely unpopular among students as seventy to eighty percent of those who studied BBA in private universities in last 10 years remained unemployed after graduation. Hence, nurturing BBA students with industry-specific employability skills has become a top priority of the educators. The urgency for upskilling graduates encouraged the researcher to evaluate if the educators and the employers felt the same way about the skill levels of the BBA graduates of Bangladesh Open University (BOU) and whether these graduates match up to the requirements of the country's recruiters.

Employability skills, also known as soft skills allow business graduates to fit well into their work environment and allow them to apply their academic knowledge in solving the problems they face in their professional lives. Employability skills prepare students to take part in various recruitment tests successfully by improving their presentation, leadership, interpersonal, communications, time management and team building skills (Nisha et al. 2018).

But the harsh reality is that, most of the BBA students graduating from Bangladesh Open University and other public and private universities of the country lack all sorts of high-level employability skills to fit to employers' changing requirements. Shackleton (2012) feels that business schools owned by the universities should market themselves to profiteering employers and to respective country's chamber of commerce authority. According to Abdin (2019), over one hundred universities in Bangladesh produce thousands of business graduates every year but what number of them make it to suitable jobs that remains questionable. It has been observed that skill gap persisting among business graduates doesn't not allow the knowledge learnt in classrooms to shape up as demonstrating skills and consequently graduates become undesirable to potential employers. Skill gap can be described as the gap between employers' required job skills and employees' actual skills (Saji et al., 2018). This gap can be effectively reduced among BBA graduates if the business schools of higher educational institutions inculcate the right deal of non-technical soft skills in their students to turn them into job ready freshers. So, it goes without saying that, academic curriculum must incorporate work skills with greater emphasis along with subject oriented skills (Ansarey, 2017). Large firms usually scan through the piles of their incoming resumes based on whether the applicants have claimed to possess the skills mentioned in the job description section of their vacancy announcements (David et al., 2011). David et al. further concluded that if a business administration graduate's resume does not refer to him as having proficiency in the company instructed skill area, he/she doesn't even get cut for the first level of consideration by the company. To bridge this skill gap, especially in the field of BBA, employers and business educators must come in agreement regarding the fact that universities are embedding the right deal of employability aka soft skills in their graduates as deemed important by the recruiters. Moreover, university educators cannot deny the fact that it is their responsibility to instill the required employability skills in their students (Ayoubi et al., 2017). As for the BBA graduates of BOU, business educators of the country may perceive that these students are adequately or moderately skilled in meeting industry requirements but recruiters may think otherwise.

In a study based on Pakistani Business graduates, Rizwan et al. (2018) found that when differences in perceptions between employers and university educators regarding critical employability skills exist profoundly, it not only hampers organizational productivity but also hinders the graduates' career start time. In Bangladesh, employers often recruit BBA graduates

through assessment tests which are designed to reflect the requirements of the industry (Fakir, 2019). However, the skills they seek are seldom found in graduation level business curriculum. Earlier, Nusrat et al. (2019) addressed this issue when the authors attempted to identify whether any perceptual difference exist among the business school faculties and the recruiters of Bangladesh regarding the skill level of fresh business graduates. Clearly, scholars can no longer deny the importance of upskilling business school graduates. In that lineage, the researcher felt motivated to explore the skill gap in BOU-BBA graduates and made the attempt to weigh the gap from the perceptual perspectives of the two main contributing groups in their academic and career lives- educators and employers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Empirical

Skill gap has caused unemployment, delays in initiating career and lower than expected salaries among Indian MBA graduates (Bhatnagar, 2020). Rizwan et al. (2018) surveyed a large number of industrial employers and engineering students in Pakistan and found that public and private university students face stressful delays in their employment when they graduate being inadequately skilled. Perceived skill gap in business graduates evidently hampers their employability. According to Sui et al. (2018), skill gap among graduates can be effectively addressed and abated if universities review their current education practice with reference to employers' requirements. According to Venkatraman (2017), the absence of collaboration among educators and industries and the subpar curriculum of educational institutions account for the broadening skill gap among graduates. This brings us to think, that there seems to be a gap in the perceptions of educators and the perceptions of employers regarding business graduates' possession of certain employability skills which might be a cause as to why the skill gap keeps expanding. The theory of gap model proposed by Parasuraman et al. (1985) becomes particularly relevant here where the authors defined gap number 5 as a deviation between customers expected and perceived service quality. In their study, Parasuraman et al. (1985) mentioned the main gap of their service quality model as Gap no. 5 which evokes in the mind of a single person-the customer. The gap arises when a customer's expectations regarding service quality are weighed against his perceptions. Frost and Kumar (2000) adapted gap 5 proposition of Parasuraman et al. to measure the service quality of Singapore airlines by exploring the difference between front-line staff's expectations and internal suppliers' perceptions. In congruence with that, we plan to utilize gap no. 5 of the mentioned service quality model in our study. By replacing customers' expectations and perceptions of the original service quality model with Bangladeshi business educators' and local recruiters' perceptions respectively, we plan on comparing these two groups' observations along a set of employability skills as possessed by the BBA graduates of Bangladesh Open University (BOU). One of the benefits of choosing Parasuraman et al.'s gap model is that it is widely recognized as a basis for comparison and it also creates room for improvement (Davis et al., 2002). Earlier Parvaiz (2014) measured the perceptions of accounting educators and employers separately to find out the gap between the expectations of educators regarding the skills acquired by accounting students on completing their graduation as opposed to the employers' perceptions regarding the extent to which they felt graduates' possess the same skills when they are job ready. Stephen and Simon (2017) conducted a study with BBA graduates of Faculty of Business Studies of Honk Kong and found out that the managerial competencies prioritized by employers like problem solving, accountability, decision making, business acumen, strategic thinking, business ethics, communications etc. were also perceived as important skills by business academics and so the academics duly addressed these competencies as the learning outcomes of their undergraduate program. With a view to improving the employability situation of the BBA graduates of BOU, this study felt the necessity to assess the mismatch in the views of the Business educators and the

views of the employers regarding the extent to which they feel the graduates of the program possess certain employability skills. Now the question arises as to what skill set shall the researcher incorporate into the study programs as a tool for assessing the skill levels of the graduates in concern. Hossain (2021) feels that graduate employment can increase in Bangladesh if universities identify the right skills that are in line with employers' demand and incorporate contemporary training programs into their syllabus. According to Asian Society (2021), knowledge earned at the classroom must be applicable in the real world along with vital skills disposable at the right avenue. As time progresses and technologies advance, business graduates must equip themselves with 21st century lifelong learning skills because most of these skills are also considered as critical employability skills. Governments all around the world are prioritizing implementation of lifelong skill acquisition at the tertiary level to keep pace with the emergence of new technologies (Kim & Park, 2020, p.2). Hui and Yia (2008) felt that since there is an increasing focus on lifelong learning, higher education systems should also be designed around developing and fostering graduate employability skills from the same perspectives. Nurturing 21st century skills like communications, problem solving, creativity, critical reasoning, teamwork and technology literacy can turn a person into a lifelong learner (Mawas & Muntaen, 2019). Therefore, academics need to put their students to practice and develop the right deal of employability skills in classrooms keeping in mind the lifelong learning perspectives. Chowdhury and Miah (2019) surveyed 418 Bangladeshi corporate managers and 973 university students to learn what shapes up to be the entry level employability skills for marketing and sales positions and found work capacity, ability to solve problem, communication skills, English proficiency, critical reasoning and confidence to be the most significant ones. Nusrat and Sultana (2019) surveyed Bangladeshi recruiters from both manufacturing and service industries and came up with some interesting insights. The ability to work in teams, target orientation, meeting deadlines, influence and leadership skills were recognized as critical skills by manufacturing employers while recruiters from service organizations thought that graduates must have interpersonal skills, work ethics, sense of responsibility and be able to work under pressure (Nusrat et al. 2019). Srivastava and Khare (2012) prepared a report for Innovative Secondary Education for Skill Enhancement project led by the Results for Development Institute where he brought to light how skill development can increase employability in South Asian countries like Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. They mentioned communications, time management, lifelong learning, negotiations, business acumen, attitude and honesty as Bangladeshi employers' skill requirements. Whiting (2020) conducted a survey online and through LinkedIn to learn about the skills that would be in demand among the employers of tomorrow and projected active learning, complex problem solving, critical thinking, stress tolerance, creativity, leadership and technology design as the top skills of 2025. When a BBA graduate aspires to join civil service in Bangladesh, he, unlike students from other disciplines sits for a preliminary exam in which a cumulative percentage of 27.5 marks out of 100 percent is purely skill-based assessment wherein they are evaluated on the basis of their information technology skills, quantitative skills, analytical skills and ethical skills. Mawas and Muntaen (2019) again referred to the KSAVE (Knowledge, Skills, Attitudes, Values and Ethics) framework in their study which mentioned creativity, critical thinking, communication, teamwork, problem-solving, ICT literacy, drive for career development, social responsibility along with a few other skills as critically important for life and work.

Whiting (2020) stressed the need to reskill employees within next five years as greater number of human roles at work are being replaced by increased automation and due to the economic impacts of pandemic. The Future of Jobs Report provides an inclusive list of the top 10 skills of 2025, all of which applies across a wide range of emerging professions. A brief review of the current scenario of Bangladeshi job market and grounding on the findings of Chowdhury and Miah (2019), Nusrat and Sultana (2019), Srivastava and Khare (2012) and based on the top skills

mentioned in WEF's Future of Jobs Reports, this study plans on assessing the BBA graduates of Bangladesh Open University(BOU) along their possession of creativity, business acumen, target orientation, ability to work under pressure, communications, critical thinking, active learning, leadership, work ethics and negotiation skills.

Employability of Bangladeshi BBA graduates and their skill gap

An employable BBA graduate is likely to have in him most of the skills as preferred by the recruiters. When employability is defined from the perspective of key skills/transferable skills concept, the presence or absence of employer-anticipated skills in graduate employees characterize them as either employable or unemployable (Matin et al., 2004). While Osmani et al. (2015) described teamwork, creativity, communications, problem solving, self-management, critical thinking and adaptability as some most frequently sought-after skills for employability, Pang et al. (2019), identified professionalism, communications, ability to work under pressure, confidence and active learning skills as the utmost important employability skills for fresh graduates. Among the South Asian countries, Bangladesh came second in graduate unemployment (Bhuiyan et al., 2020) with Dhaka (the country's capital) having the highest number of unemployed graduates ranging between 63000 to 67000 annually (Chowdhury,2019). Another South Asian nation, India's 93% graduate students (from medium and bottom ranked business schools) experience prolonged periods of unemployment because they lack appropriate industry specific knowledge and skills (Bhatnagar, 2020). Mamun (2015) claimed that public and private university education systems in Bangladesh are converting their students into subject specialists but are not empowering them to the extent where they can transform their subject knowledge into skills required by the employers. Bhatnagar (2020) in her study on Indian MBA graduates again revealed that when skills learnt by MBA students do not transform them into desirable job candidates for recruiters, the emergence of skill gap is inevitable. This is no exception for Bangladeshi BBA graduates who often fail to demonstrate their job skills as expected by the employers because of the prevalence of skill gap. Skill gap continues to widen in BBA graduates especially when educators think that the existing business education curriculum designed for the BBA level students is sufficiently turning the students into job ready candidates which however is different from employers' feelings about these students' skill possessions. It is high time, we learnt Business educators' perception about BBA graduates' skill level along certain parameters so that it can be weighed against the industry experts' perception of the same skills as possessed by the mentioned graduate group. Employers often articulate the job outcomes of various work roles which can be attained only when employees possess certain skills as such mentioned in the literature review section of the paper. Employers' perception of BBA graduates' skill level is likely to enlighten educators to redesign or upgrade their academic curriculum to incorporate skill-based grading system where some subjects may only have pass/fail assessment on earning the skill successfully. If the educator- employer perceptual gap regarding BBA graduates' skill level could be weighed, the researcher will be able to propose the skill parameters along which BOU-BBA graduates could be trained in their classrooms which in turn will ensure their employability in local and global job markets.

The extant literatures in the context of Bangladesh have drawn light mostly on the perceptual differences between employer groups and fresh graduate groups to explore exactly where the latter group lacks in their possession of the employability skills. While Chowdhury and Miah (2019) surveyed the gap in the views of business students and employers regarding the employability skills they deem to be necessary for entry level marketing positions, Nusrat and Sultana (2019) surveyed the variance between Bangladeshi recruiters' skill requirements for different business roles as mentioned in their advertisements and the actual skill needs perceived by the faculties of local business schools. Chowdhury (2020) grounded upon six specific skills of graduate

employability when she was looking for skill gaps in business graduates opting for a career in Bangladeshi banking industry. Zuma (2021) shortlisted nine soft skills namely problem solving, interpersonal skills, creativity, communications, work ethics, adaptability, teamwork, leadership and time management and analyzed their significance in exploring employment opportunities for business graduates in Bangladesh. This study will employ Gap no. 5 of Parasuraman et al's (1985) gap theory as a basis for exploring the difference between the perceptions of Bangladeshi business educators and the perceptions of local employers regarding Bangladesh Open University's BBA graduates' possession of ten specific skills-creativity, business acumen, target orientation, ability to work under pressure, communications, critical reasoning and problem solving, active learning, leadership, work ethics and negotiation skills.

Communication skills for a BBA graduate means he is able to speak fluently and convincingly in Bangla and English and is adept in writing rational business documents and letters. When conducting her study on the practical work skills needed by the business graduates of Bangladesh, Nusrat et al. (2019) found that both Bangladeshi employers and business school academics find communications to be a very crucial skill for business graduates at work. As per Chandra Vadhana (2019) the ability to communicate, present and write official documents and reports professionally constitutes an individual's professional communications skills.

A creative BBA graduate brings in out of the box, innovative and effective solutions to address old and new problems faced by the organization on a daily basis. According to Parviat (2014), at the professional level creative thinking is used as a generic term which translates into a skill when a business graduate can solve old problems in a new and effective way.

When a BBA graduate is enthusiastic about gaining knowledge, actively takes up new challenges and new projects to augment his learning experience and keeps himself updated on local and global business trends, he could be labelled as an active learner. The development of active learning skills at the university level requires an active learning classroom which engages graduates in small group problem solving and helps them apply course concepts in real life situations. (Stalp & Hill, 2019).

Business roles at local and global multinational companies often overwhelm their employees with increased responsibilities and urgent deadlines which may cause a sense of work pressure/stress in them. Work pressure among employees also stems from repetitive work assignments imposed by employers. Hence in recruiting fresh BBA graduates, companies often look out for individuals who have the ability to handle work pressure better than others. The capacity to maintain good performance at the face of work overload, family and health problems, deadlines, problematic colleagues and exhaustion makes an employee stress tolerant and desirable to employers (Rani, 2020).

Having Business acumen means the BBA graduate will be able to analyze organizational situations with precision, make business decisions tactfully and utilize his functional knowledge of Marketing, Accounting, Finances and Strategic management in resolving day to day organizational activities. According to Stern and Walters (2005), when an individual has business acumen he understands the strategic position of the firm in the market, knows how to induce organizational growth and increase profitability and interpret the financial data relevant to corporate success.

Negotiation skills empowers a BBA graduate to manage people, deals and contracts at the organizational level to the extent where the negotiator comes to a peaceful consensus with the party at the other end. Negotiation skills are not innate but learnt and practiced and as per Chebet

et al. (2015), it is a crucial weapon to improve the competitiveness of the organization in the market.

A BBA graduate with critical reasoning and problem-solving skills will be able to rationally apply facts and knowledge to solve work problems, analyze and interpret data and critical office documents and draw logical arguments to support his statements. Parvaiz (2014) emphasized that Pakistani educators described their accounting graduates' ability to solve a work problem practically and feasibly as the core problem solving competency expected of them by the recruiters.

Work ethics for any employee mainly stems from his personal drive to always adhere to ethically correct situations. According to Azhar et al. (2019), proper training on work ethics is much needed to cause some ethical learning in business students as the BBA curriculum conventionally includes a few courses on Business ethics which barely evokes morality in students.

Leadership skill among BBA graduates implies how well they can manage and motivate a group of employees to work toward a strategic direction and how better they distribute tasks among group members as business leaders. Sadly, no public or private university with a BBA program in Bangladesh is currently offering major courses on leadership skills for business executives (Howladar et al., 2016).

A BBA graduate with target orientation will set practical goals to achieve a planned organizational outcome, maintain an "every day plan of action" for reaching the targets set and persistently strive to attain them. When a business graduate accomplishes his tasks by setting attainable goals and maintains a to-do list at work, he is known to be target oriented (Vadhana, 2019).

Objective of the Study

The above discussion on BBA graduates' skills brings the researcher to put forth the main objectives of this paper-

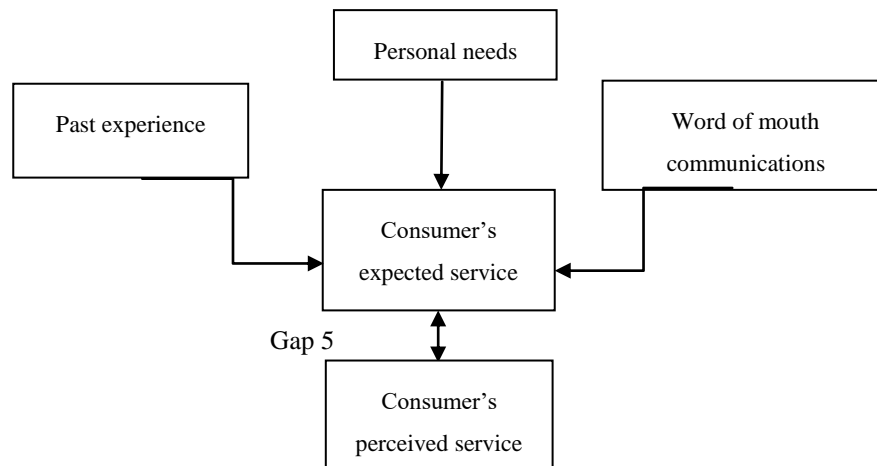
- i. To probe the Business educators (currently teaching BBA students in various Bangladeshi universities) to depict their perceptions regarding Bangladesh Open University's (BOU) BBA graduates' possession of each of the ten employability skills-communications, creativity, business acumen, target orientation, ability to work under pressure, critical reasoning and problem solving, active learning, leadership, work ethics and negotiations.
- ii. To evaluate the perceptions of Bangladeshi employers regarding BOU- BBA graduates' possession of each of the ten employability skills.
- iii. To explore the gap between the perceptions of the educators and the perceptions of the employers along the mentioned employability skills.
- iv. To recommend the skills that needs to be inculcated in BOU-BBA graduates with priority with a view to improving their employability as soon as they graduate.

Earlier, Dubey and Tiwari (2020) developed a hypothesis for their study to find out if any gap existed in the perceptions of ICT students and the perceptions of recruiters regarding the students' possession of several soft skills. This validates the construction of the following hypothesis for the study in concern.

Hypothesis: There is no perceptual gap between Bangladeshi Business educators and Bangladeshi employers regarding BOU-BBA graduates' possession of the ten employability skills-communications, ability to work under pressure, active learning, negotiations, leadership, critical reasoning and problem solving, target orientation, business acumen, work ethics and creativity.

THEORITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Educational service also falls in the domain of service marketing (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2001) and service marketing literature has time and again focused on the gap between customers' expectations and perceptions (Parasuraman et al., 1988). From that perspective, the study figured that, the essence of measuring the gap in the perceptions of educators and the perceptions of employers could be well embedded in Parasuraman et al.'s (1985) Service Quality Model. This model had widely been used to determine the size and factors of service quality from consumers' perspectives. Off the five gaps discussed in the model, gap 5 tries to figure out the divergence between the expectations and perceptions of a consumer regarding the service quality he receives. Parasuraman et al. (1985) viewed that consumers' perceptions of service quality are largely influenced by their needs, past experiences and word of mouth communications. As per Figure 1 of the Service quality model, gap 5 takes the shape as shown below.



Note. This figure represents a partial view of the original service quality model which summarizes the factors affecting the service delivered and the discrepancy between expected and perceived quality of service from consumers' perspectives. Adapted from "A Conceptual Model of Service Quality and Its Implications for Future Research," by A. Parasuraman, VA. Zeithaml and LL. Berry, 1985, *Journal of Marketing*, 49(4), p.44 (<https://doi.org/10.1177/002224298504900403>). Copyright 1985 by SAGE Publications.

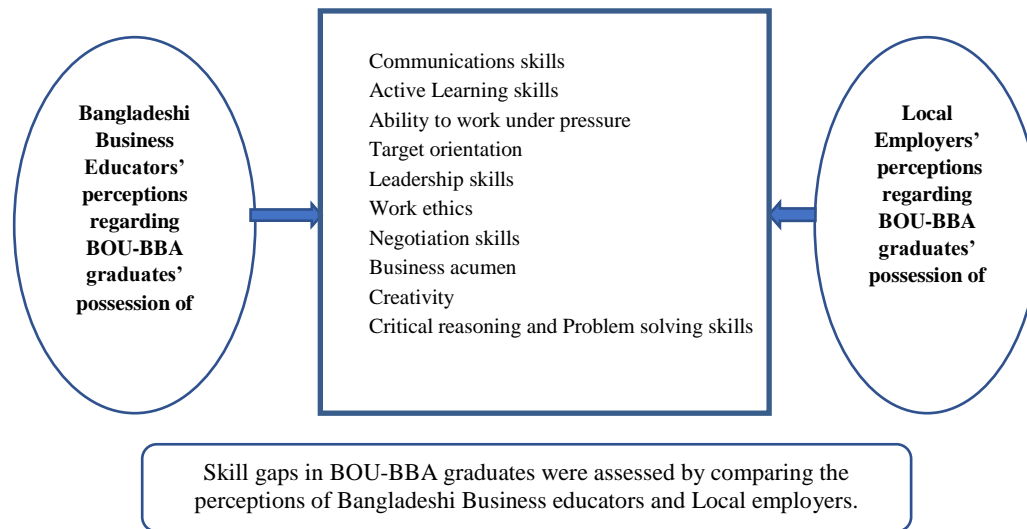
We replaced consumers' perspectives of gap no 5 with two different variables-business educators' perceptions and employers' perceptions. In the original study by Parasuraman et al. (1985), the expectation-perception gap was measured along the service quality but in our research the unit of perceptual gap assessment became the continuum along which BOU-BBA graduates possess the ten specific gap skills as mentioned earlier. Judiciously selected business educators and local employers from across the country were asked to reveal their perceptions regarding the extent to which they believed the BBA graduates of BOU possessed certain employability skills like-creativity, business acumen, target orientation, ability to work under pressure, communications, critical reasoning and problem solving, active learning, leadership, work ethics and negotiation

skills. The gap in their views allowed the researcher to learn exactly which skills were lacked by the BOU-BBA graduates as per the employers yet perceived to be possessed by them as per the educators. The gap in the views of the employers and educators in terms of each skill was also weighed.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The hypothesis developed for this study was put into the following conceptual framework-

Figure 1
A hypothetical framework to explore the employer-educator perceptual skill gap of BOU-BBA graduates



METHODOLOGY

Two groups of respondents became the voice of this study- business educators and local employers of Bangladesh. Thus, two separate sets of structured questionnaires using Google form were devised to collect data from each group. According to the University Grants Commission of Bangladesh currently the country has 51 public and 108 private universities ("Top 10 Business", 2022). "Top 10 Business" again cited that almost all of these universities offer BBA programs. However, it was not possible to determine the exact number of business academics who work in these universities in various designations. So, 35 business educators from different levels (Lecturer, Senior Lecturer, Assistant Professor, Associate Professor and Professor) and from different public and private universities of the country were selectively chosen by the researcher who reflected their perceptions regarding each skill in concern. Also, 25 recruiters from a number of Dhaka based government, private, NGO and international organizations participated in the survey and revealed their perceptions on each skill in concern. Over a span of four weeks, 62 sets of questionnaires were distributed through email and other free messaging apps like WhatsApp and Messenger. Two submissions from each group of respondents were verified to be invalid, rendering a total final sample of 60 respondents (35 business educators plus 25 local employers). This study wisely employed selective sampling method as the number of primary data sources were limited to the researcher yet a better representation of the population was required. For the

sake of easily accessing the employer group, people with the authority to recruit BBA graduates in their current organizations aka the recruitment personnel from employers' organizations were surveyed.

Data Collection

The online questionnaire devised for the Business educator group consisted of twelve sections. The first section enquired educators about their gender, job designation and the length of their job experience in Business education. From section three onwards, they were asked to rate the BBA graduates of Bangladesh Open University (BOU) along their possession of each of the ten skills (communications, business acumen, target orientation, ability to work under pressure, critical reasoning and problem solving, creativity, active learning, leadership, work ethics and the ability to negotiate) on a five-point Likert scale with 1 being Strongly disagree to 5 being Strongly agree. The second set of questionnaires was disbursed among the recruiters from government, private, NGO and international agencies. This group again reflected their perceptions towards BOU-BBA graduates' possession of each of the above-mentioned skills on the same five-point Likert scale. For both sets of questionnaires, the items under the communications construct, ability to work under pressure construct and all the other items under the constructs of active learning skills, target orientation, leadership skills and work ethics were adapted from Chandra Vadhana (2019)'s doctoral thesis paper questionnaire for assessing managerial soft skills. The items under the constructs of Business acumen, negotiation skills, critical reasoning and creativity in both the questionnaires were adapted from Parviaz (2014)'s doctoral thesis paper questionnaire for employers' performance and expectation gap. As both sets of questionnaires tried to delve into the perceptual mindsets of educators and employers, the predicament of actually instructing, mentoring, teaching or even interviewing any BOU-BBA graduate in the past did not turn out to be a prior condition for participating in the study for any of the respondent groups.

Analysis Technique

Data obtained from both the educator and employer groups were analyzed using SPSS 23 software and tabulated for the ease of deploying descriptive statistical analysis. Mean scores along with Standard deviation for the employers' perceptions and the educators' perceptions across each of the ten skills were determined and compared. To test the hypothesis, the two tailed *t*-test was employed. The reliability for each employability skill was measured by Cronbach's alpha and the values obtained were 0.879, 0.741, 0.879, 0.949, 0.872, 0.849 and 0.9 for Communications skills, Ability to work under pressure, Target orientation, Creativity, Leadership skills, Critical reasoning and Active learning skills respectively. Any Cronbach's alpha value above 0.7 is considered to be good (Nunnaly & Bernstein, 1994). Like many other researchers, Singh and Singh (2017) also analyzed the reliability of their descriptive data using the Cronbach's alpha measure when they were evaluating the potential for developing Employability skills on the E-learning platform.

Table 1
Testing data reliability for each employability skill with Cronbach's alpha

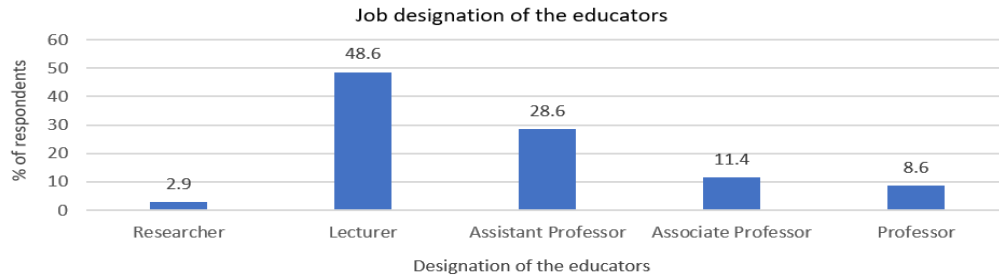
Items	Critical reasoning and problem-solving skills	Leadership skills	Creativity	Ability to work under pressure	Target orientation	Communication skills	Active Learning skills
Cronbach's alpha	0.849	0.872	0.949	0.741	0.879	0.879	0.9

Notes: Cronbach's alpha value was not required for Business Acumen, Negotiations and Work ethics as each of these skill variables had single items in both sets of questionnaires.

RESULTS

The Business Educators reached out for the study were still in the profession of teaching BBA students in different public and private universities across the country. Almost half of them were Lecturers (48.6%) followed by Assistant Professors (28.6%), Associate Professors (11.4%), Professors (8.6%), and Researchers (2.9%).

Figure 2
Job designation of the surveyed Business Educators



Local company recruiters were respondents mostly representing their own organizations. Majority of these respondents (almost 64%) were Recruiting Associates from various organizations like, Portfolio managers, Associate managers, Managers, Project coordinators & even one Managing Director. 24% of the recruiters were currently employed in the Human Resources division of their organization followed by 4% recruiters working in the Sales sector and 8% engineers who directly participated in recruiting and interviewing graduates for their firms.

Figure 3
Local recruiters surveyed from various occupational levels

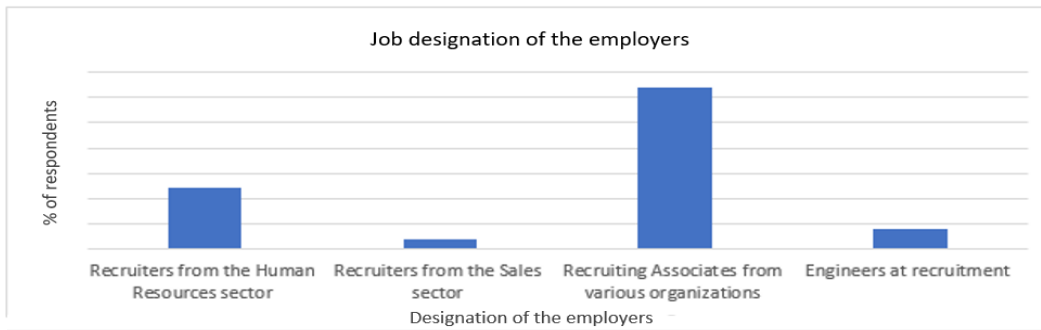
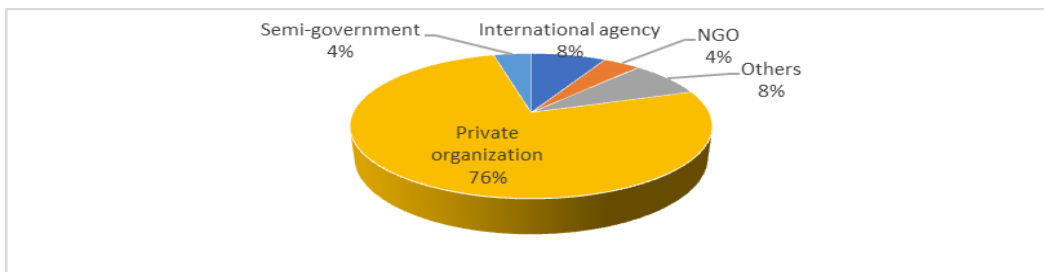


Figure 4
Pie chart representing the percentage of recruiters surveyed from various organizational backgrounds



76% of the recruiters who participated in hiring and interviewing BBA graduates for their firms were employees of Bangladeshi private organizations. 8% of the recruiter respondents were employees of international agencies followed by 4% recruiters from both Semi-government companies and NGOs. 8% of the recruiter employees reported to work neither for any semi-government firm nor for any private / international firm or NGO. Perhaps they were employees who recruit graduates for the government or autonomous organizations.

HYPOTHESIS TESTING AND DISCUSSION

Among the employability skills, the highest Mean±SD (3.83±1.01) rating was found among the educators for the Business Acumen skill which, however, was higher than the corresponding Mean±SD rating found among the employers' group (2.96±1.14). The lowest Mean±SD (3.63±.88) rating was observed in the educators' group for the critical reasoning and problem-solving skill of the BOU-BBA graduates. Yet this specific rating was interestingly higher than the corresponding employer group rating (2.94±.86). This result indicated that business educators teaching BBA graduates all around the country perceived that BOU-BBA graduates had a much better grasp in business acumen compared to all other skills where the graduates' possession of the critical reasoning and problem-solving skill was perceived to be the lowest.

In contrast, among the employers, the highest Mean±SD (3.44±.87) rating was found for the skill of work ethics. Surprisingly it was lower than the corresponding Mean±SD rating in the group of educators (3.80±.99). The lowest Mean±SD (2.90±.94) rating was surveyed for the skill of leadership in the employers' group which again was interestingly lower than the educators' corresponding Mean±SD rating (3.73±.86). This result indicates that, the employers or recruiters from different organizations thought that BBA graduates of BOU had much better work ethics compared to other skills where their leadership skill was at the lowest.

To test H1 with a view to exploring the perceptual gap between the employers and educators regarding the graduates' possession of the ten skills, the researcher felt the necessity to deploy the independent sample *t*-test in this study.

Table 2
Descriptive analysis of Business educators' and Employers' perceptual ratings on employability skills with results of *t* test.

Employability skills	Educators			Employers			P-value (Independent sample <i>t</i> test)
	Mean±SD	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Mean±SD	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		
		Lower Bound	Upper Bound		Lower Bound	Upper Bound	
Communication skills	3.80±.76	3.5377	4.0623	3.01±1.01	2.5958	3.4308	0.001
Ability to work under pressure	3.71±.69	3.4776	3.9510	3.10±.76	2.7847	3.4153	0.002
Active learning skills	3.66±.93	3.3378	3.9765	2.96±.88	2.5980	3.3220	0.024
Target orientation	3.77±.74	3.5169	4.0260	3.00±1.00	2.5872	3.4128	0.001
Leadership skills	3.73±.86	3.4330	4.0241	2.90±.94	2.5139	3.2861	0.001
Work ethics	3.80±.99	3.4585	4.1415	3.44±.87	3.0809	3.7991	0.151
Critical reasoning and problem-solving skills	3.63±.88	3.3272	3.9300	2.94±.86	2.5859	3.2941	0.004
Business acumen	3.83±1.01	3.4802	4.1770	2.96±1.14	2.4912	3.4288	0.003
Creativity	3.65±.91	3.3460	3.9682	3.02±1.08	2.5722	3.4678	0.016
Negotiation skills	3.71±.67	3.4850	3.9435	3.20±1.04	2.7704	3.6296	0.023

Three items were employed to measure the communications skill of BOU-BBA graduates in both sets of questionnaires-graduates' presentation skills, their ability to express opinion in a discussion and their efficiency in drafting official reports and documents. The mean ratings of these three

items obtained from the responses of the educators was found to be much higher (3.80) than those of the employers' (3.01). P value was calculated to be 0.001. P value of .001 (less than 0.01) indicated highly significant difference between the responses of the two groups, i.e., there was a highly significant difference between the perceptions of educators and the perceptions of employers regarding BOU-BBA graduates' communication skills.

The two items under the ability to work under pressure construct were associated with the graduates' crisis handling capacity and the capacity to handle deadlines with less stress. The Leadership skills construct included items relating to leading members in a group and distributing tasks as a leader. The graduates' problem-solving capacity and the aptitude to infer from data proficiency made up the construct of Critical-reasoning and problem-solving skills. The items employed to measure the Target orientation construct involved the graduates' ability to set clear job goals and whether or not they were found to maintain a to-do list at work. The only item under the Business acumen construct dealt with the graduates' understanding of organizational strategies and their knowledge on Accounting, Finance and Marketing disciplines. Educators' mean ratings on all these skills were found to be higher than that of the employers' ratings. The P value for each of the above-mentioned skill mean came out less than 0.01. Therefore, the study inferred that there was a highly significant difference between the perceptions of educators and the perceptions of employers regarding BOU-BBA graduates' Ability to work under pressure, Leadership, Target orientation, Business acumen, Critical reasoning and problem-solving skills.

In both sets of questionnaires, the Active learning skill construct consisted of two primary items- whether the BOU-BBA graduate updated himself regularly with latest trends in the world of business and his level of enthusiasm when it came to taking up new projects at work. Graduates' creativity was weighed in terms of their capacity to find innovative solutions to problems at work and the efficacy of the newfound solutions. The only item employed to measure the Negotiation skills construct was based on the BBA graduates' overall capacity to convince business collaborators when a deal needed to be set up.

In comparison to Communications, Leadership, Target orientation, Business acumen, Critical reasoning and the Ability to work under pressure skills, less perceptual disagreement was found between the employers and educators regarding the graduates' Active learning spirit, Negotiations skills and Creativity. However, the difference among educators' and employers' perceptions for the latter set of skills were found to be significant when the p-value was calculated for each one of these skills (P value lied between 0.01 to 0.05 every time for Active learning skills, Negotiations skills and Creativity).

The item used in both sets of questionnaires to assess the Work ethics of BOU- BBA graduates was whether or not they were perceived to be ethically correct in future life situations. No significant difference was found ($p=0.151$) between the perceptual mean ratings of educators and employers regarding the graduates' Work ethics which however was not reflected when the mean ratings of the two groups were compared roughly.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study was conducted with an intention to assess the gap (if any) in the views of Bangladeshi business educators and local employers regarding the length to which they felt the BBA students of BOU possessed some of the most important skills demanded by present day employers. The aim was to determine perceived skill gap avenues along which students could be nurtured in classrooms so that they became more competent in the job market and also to find ways to incorporate skill based learning in the current BBA curricula. Whenever the perceptual gap among the educators and the employers along a specific skill was found to expand, the researcher logically inferred that perhaps the employers thought that the specific skill was strongly lacking in

the BOU-BBA graduates but the educators thought that the graduates possessed that skill adequately and vice-versa. The study indicated that Bangladeshi employers seemed to have a very different perception from the country's business academics when it came to BOU-BBA graduates' communication skills. Business educators of Bangladeshi public and private universities also had a very contradictory perception from employers regarding the graduates' ability to work under pressure, business acumen, target orientation, leadership and problem-solving skills. Clearly, the BOU academics need to initiate organized attempts to infuse these skills in their BBA students with highest priority. Active learning skills, creativity and negotiation skills should also be inculcated in the BBA graduates with next line of priority as substantial perceptual gap was found between the recruiters and educators along the possession of these skills. However, both the academics and company employers perceived the BBA students of the university as ethical. Regardless, ethical training and learning should continue to be the essence of every curriculum be it technical or business. If the policy makers of BOU can introduce a learning system that stresses these skills in their BBA classrooms, not only the students will become more competitive and industry aligned, but also the image of the university's business school will be uplifted as no other public/private university in Bangladesh currently has a skill-based BBA program in place. Developing skills is never a waste as skills prevent competent BBA graduates from facing delay in their career start time. Skilled graduates can also initiate innovative business ventures which in turn increase employment opportunities for many others in the community.

LIMITATIONS

This study recommended the skill avenues where BBA graduates are needed to be nurtured in their classrooms. A similar study could be conducted among the students of other disciplines of the country like Engineering, Health Science, MBA, Economics to find out whether any perceptual gap exist among the employers and educators in their respective fields. Because of time and resource constraints, this study drew small-sized samples from the educator and employer communities of Bangladesh. A better representation of the studied groups may generate different patterns of insights. Developing a priority based skill index for the BBA graduates and bringing changes in BOU's Business education curricula call for more longitudinal surveys which could not be accommodated in the current study.

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