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Career Awareness and Institutional Challenges Faced by Students with Physical Disabilities in Tertiary Education: A Micro-Level Study of First-Year Students at Rajshahi University

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ABSTRACT

Students with disabilities repeatedly face significant challenges throughout their life in all possible aspects. While some have been able to gain admission into the university system, many are still unaware of career options as well as the supportive policies extended to them by the government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and universities. This knowledge gap weakens their chances to potential career growth. This study concerns itself with the level of career awareness among first-year students with disabilities at Rajshahi University. The study covers their career awareness level, career information sources, challenges, and expectations, followed by recommendations on policies. Data were collected from 10 varied participants (in terms of gender, discipline, and type of disability) through a detailed structured questionnaire. The analysis was done using Microsoft Excel and SPSS. The findings revealed that the average level of career awareness was 58 percent on five core indicators. Half of the respondents depended on teachers mainly for career guidance. Notably, 70 percent did not know about the role of NGOs in supporting career development, implying an absence of institutional linkage. Moreover, 90 percent showed interest in attending training on entrepreneurship and freelancing. The research, therefore, recommends enhancing career awareness programs in order to expedite career growth of physically-challenged students at tertiary level and strengthening partnerships between universities and NGOs to assist students with disabilities for career guidance.

JEL Classifications: I21, J24
Keywords: Career Awareness, Students with Disabilities, Tertiary Education, Career Guidance.

1. INTRODUCTION

Students with disabilities (SWDs) in Bangladesh have huge obstacles to access and perform in higher education and other labour markets related to higher education. Although the

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Persons with Disabilities Rights and Protection Act was enacted in 2013 to ensure equal access to education and employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities, challenges remain (Mamun et al., 2024). About BBS, around 40.29% of persons with disabilities are enrolled at different levels of education; only 2.72% have completed their higher secondary or postsecondary education as per (The Business Standard, 2023). The difference speaks of the systemic barriers that lash the academic progress of SWDs.

Students with disabilities face various challenges associated with infrastructural barriers, lack of accessible learning materials, and inadequate support services in higher education institutions (HEIs). A study by Alam and Kabir (2021) across four public universities in Bangladesh revealed that many SWDs use adaptive strategies like the use of assistive devices and peer assistance. Unfortunately, these coping mechanisms usually do not add up to the need for full institutional support.

First-year students on disability at Rajshahi University are torn between possible major career paths for themselves in life due to the absence of specific guidance on available choices. Career development matters for these students because it turns out to be a straightforward indicator of their future success. Nonetheless, research shows that these students are often excluded from career planning programs and a good number of them hardly find jobs after graduation (Shaw & Dukes, 2001). In fact, students with disabilities have not benefited anywhere across the globe. Postsecondary institutions have barriers, like limited physical access barriers and a lack of inclusive career counselling services, and they have very low collaboration between universities and external organisations' efforts (World Bank, 2013). This also indicates from UNESCO that disabled learners have never attained required career resources which relate very much to the excellent development of careers. The lack in access to these resources can be too vital to be seen as a significant factor in entering the labour market negatively (Burgstahler, 2015).

This report commissioned by BRAC identifies different levels of career awareness among the first ten physically challenged students at Rajshahi University (session: 2023-2024). This is aimed at identifying core sources of career-related information, the nature of institutional hindrances related to career awareness, and students' inclination toward various skill-based programs offered by NGOs. The study seeks to advocate for action-oriented policies for BRAC to strengthen BRAC career services for students with disabilities and create an inclusive and enabling environment at Rajshahi University and similar institutions based on international frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Career development for students with disabilities has gained increasing scholarly attention under the framework of inclusive higher education. Although many researchers argue that simply getting students with disabilities access to institutions will not make them employment-ready unless structured career support is provided, Lindsay, Cagliostro, and Carter (2018a) provided empirical evidence from a U.S. study that career services informed by disability needs-involving individualized counselling and workplace mentoring-

significantly assist students' transition from university to regular employment. Their results show that interventions must be tailored in relation to the varying assessments of students with disabilities.

Systematic analyses of higher education systems all over the world affirm that the institutional mechanism for career preparation is often disjointed. Moriña, Cortés-Vega, and Martínez-Váquez (2022) reviewed inclusive-education practices across developing universities and found that three persistent weaknesses prevail: disability disclosure, professional identity formation, and structured poising within the institution for career guidance. They concluded by affirming that career development often has a marginal consideration in the inclusion policies of universities.

Another viewpoint focuses on labour-market inclusion. Lindsay, Cagliostro, Albarico, Mortaji, and Kessler (2018b) carried out a systematic review showing unmistakable organizational advantages-gain such as innovation and productivity-by hiring persons with disabilities. This reinforces that an investment in career development programs at the university level pays dividends for both society and institutions.

Nonetheless, gaps in the various disciplines of higher education indicate that there are still significant hurdles to translation. Powell, Felder, and Mara (2023) observed that disability studies within academia remain limited and that systemic ableism continues to affect professional growth and career progression. Their work points to the need for universities to reassess structural norms and develop equitable pathways from education to professional employment. These studies illustrate global advances in inclusion but nonetheless reveal persistent deficits in early career awareness and development for students with disabilities.

While the international literature illustrates the significance of inclusive career services, micro-level evidence from developing countries, particularly Bangladesh, is still very scarce. Most of the existing research focuses on accessibility and policy rather than on the career-awareness experiences of first-year students with physical disabilities. In addition, there is a scant amount of empirical work on the type and extent of collaboration between NGOs and universities in relation to career information and skills training. Therefore, this study seeks to fill that gap and examine career awareness, information sources, institutional challenges, and expectations of first-year physically challenged students at Rajshahi University.

3. Research Questions

(a) To what extent first-year students with disabilities at Rajshahi University are aware of their career?
(b) What are the primary sources of career-related information for these students?
(c) What are the key the institutional challenges faced by students with disabilities in pursuing career development within the university?
(d) To what extent these students are interested in acquiring career-related skills through NGO-led training or development programs?

2. Key Objectives

- To examine the level of career awareness among first-year students with disabilities at Rajshahi University.

- To identify the primary sources from which these students receive career-related information and guidance.
- To explore the institutional challenges faced by students with disabilities in pursuing career development within the university.
- To assess the students' interest in acquiring career-related skills through NGO-led training or development programs.
- To recommend short-term actionable policy to bridge the gap in career support focusing on enhancing career support for students with disabilities in higher education.

3. METHODOLODY

3.1. Study Design

This exploratory study employs a cross-sectional quantitative analysis covering 10 physically-challenged first-year university students of Rajshahi University.

3.2. Study Population and Sample

The study population comprised approximately 70 first-year students with disabilities enrolled in the 2023-24 academic session. From this population, the researcher randomly selected 10 students to participate in the survey.

3.3. Data Collection

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire.

3.4. Data Analysis

All statistical analyses will be conducted using appropriate statistical software **(SPSS & Excel)**, with meticulous attention to the survey. This will involve incorporating primary sampling units (PSUs) and stratification to ensure the representativeness of the findings and the accuracy of variance estimation.

4. FINDING AND ANALYSIS

In this section of this report, the findings of the collected information from the participants will be analysed with interpretation.

4.1. Demographic Information of the Respondents

The study encompassed 10 first-year students with disabilities at Rajshahi University. Their demographic characteristics are summarized as follows:

Gender		
	N	%
Female	4	40.0%
Male	6	60.0%

Gender Distribution

Among the 10 respondents, 60% were male (n=6) and 40% were female (n=4). This shows a slightly higher representation of male students among the physically challenged fresher cohort.

Type of Disability		
	N	%
Physical	7	70.0%
Visual	2	20.0%
Others	1	10.0%

Type of Disability

Most of the subjects reported their disabilities as physical (70%, n=7), in the second place is from students facing visual problems (20%, n=2), whereas only one respondent (10%) categorized it under "Other." This distribution gives emphasis that students with physical disabilities form the major group that represents the university's first-year disabled student population.

Faculty		
	N	%
Science	2	20.0%
Arts	2	20.0%
Social Science	4	40.0%
Business	2	20.0%

Faculty Affiliation

Students from a variety of faculties were enrolled, with the Faculty of Social Science having the highest number of participants (40%, n=4). Equal numbers of participants came from the Faculty of Science (20%, n=2), from the Faculty of Arts (20%, n=2), and from the Faculty of Business (20%, n=2). The spread of this sample reflects a moderately balanced distribution of students with disabilities across major academic disciplines at Rajshahi University.

Demographic Information of the Respondents				
		Gender	Type of Disability	Faculty
N	Valid	10	10	10
Mean			1.50	2.60
Std. Deviation			.972	1.075

Variance		.944	1.156
Range		3	3
Minimum		1	1
Maximum		4	4

Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive data showed variability across the demographic variables:

Gender average is 1.50 (meaning presumably 1=Female and 2=Male), showing a slight male dominance. Mean disability types scores is 2.60, indicating that most students are clustered somewhere between physical disability type and visual disability type.

Mean faculty score being 2.60, suggests dispersion across the various faculties, concentrating on middle ranges, probably Social Science and Arts. Standard deviations and variances for type of disability and faculty indicate moderate variability across the sample and the range (maximum-minimum=3) corroborates a diverse range of responses across all categories.

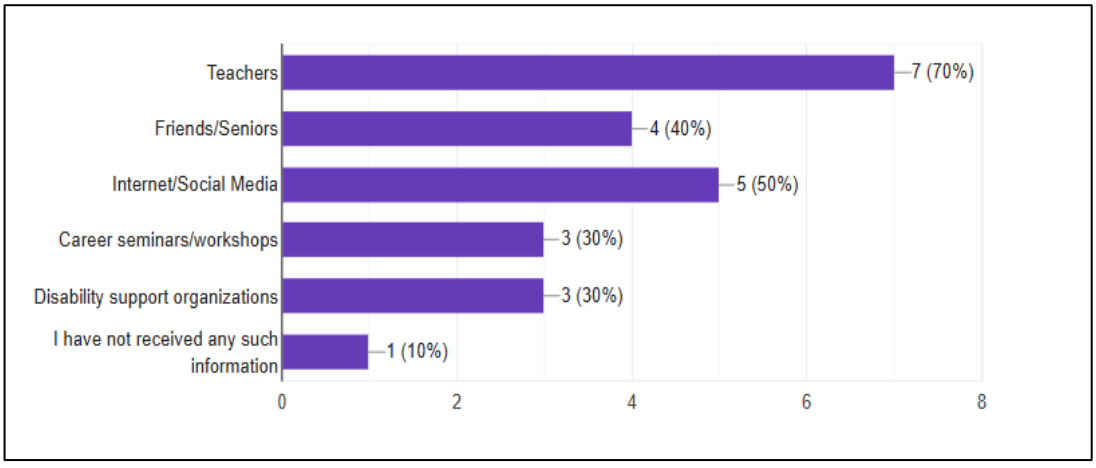
4.2. Career Awareness Level Analysis

Career Awareness Level			
	Responses		Percent of Cases
	N	Percent	
1. Heard of career planning activities.	10	34.5%	100.0%
2. Aware of career pathways related to major.	9	31.0%	90.0%
3. Prepared CV/resume with support.	3	10.3%	30.0%
4. Know organizations supporting job placements for students with disabilities.	4	13.8%	40.0%
5. Received career information tailored to disability needs.	3	10.3%	30.0%
Total	29	100.0%	290%
Average of Total			**58%**

The chart shows that 34.5% of the respondents had heard of some career planning activities, while 31% were aware of at least one job pathway concerning their major. Conversely, only 10.3% had prepared a CV with some help, and a similar percentage received career information that catered to their disability needs.

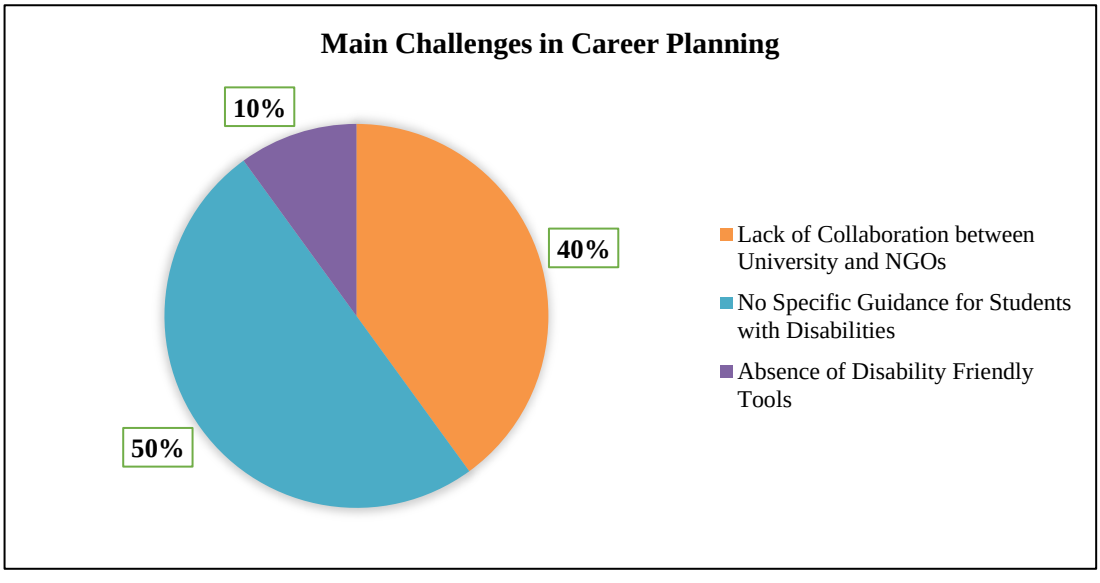
According to the reporter, all five statements in the chart indicate career awareness. These questions required a Yes or No answer, after which multiple response analysis was conducted with SPSS. The total of the percentages obtained from the responses to these questions shows that the overall career awareness level of respondents will be 58%.

4.3. Sources of career-related information



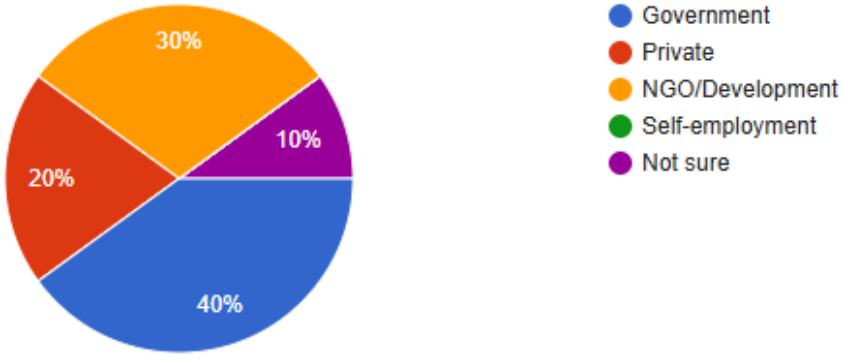
The chart reveals that most students with disabilities turn to their teachers (70%) and the internet (50%) for help with their career choices. Their friends and seniors (40%) also provide a lot of assistance. However, few opt for workshops or disability support services (30%); and only one student declares that he received no information at all about careers.

4.4. Main Challenges in Career Planning



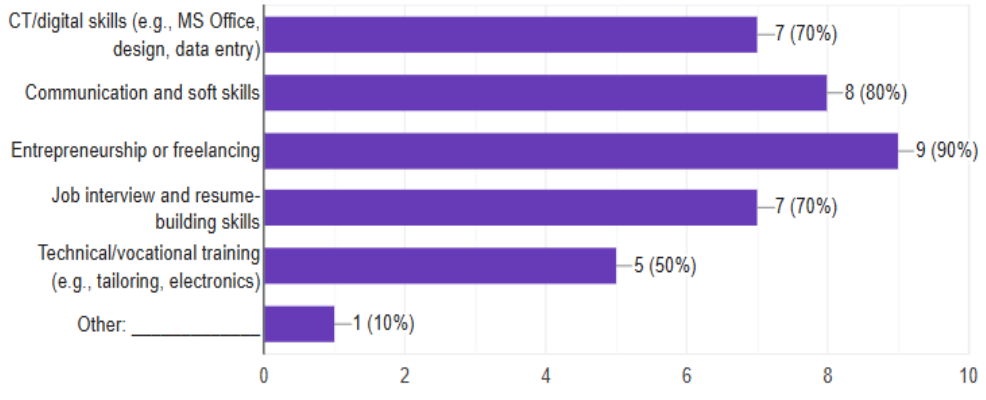
Half of the students with disabilities at Rajshahi University feel they don't get enough support, and many also identify a gap in teamwork between the university and NGOs. While physical access seems to be improving, there is still a need for more thoughtful, inclusive planning.

4.5. Preferred Career Track



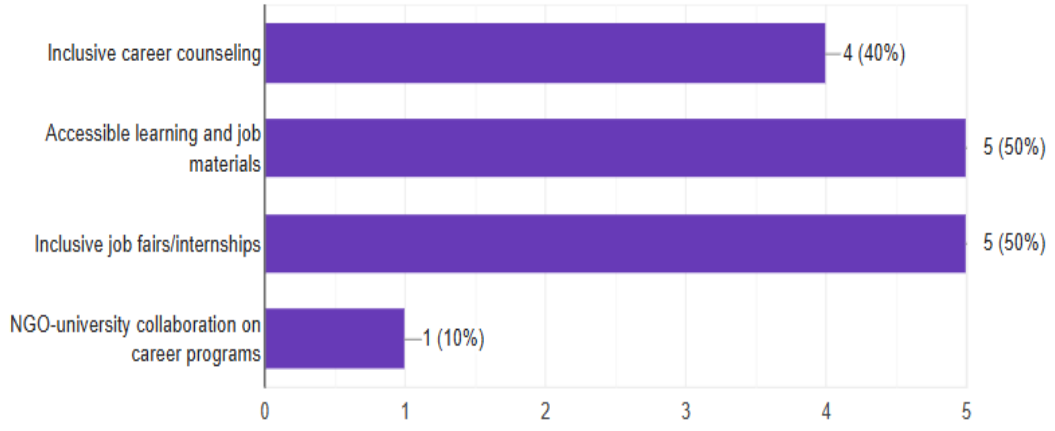
The chart categorizes the career preferences and shows that the majority (40%) prefer working in government sectors, followed by 30% leaning towards NGO/Development, 20% opting for private sector jobs, and 10% favouring self-employment.

4.6. Expected Skill-based Programs from NGOs



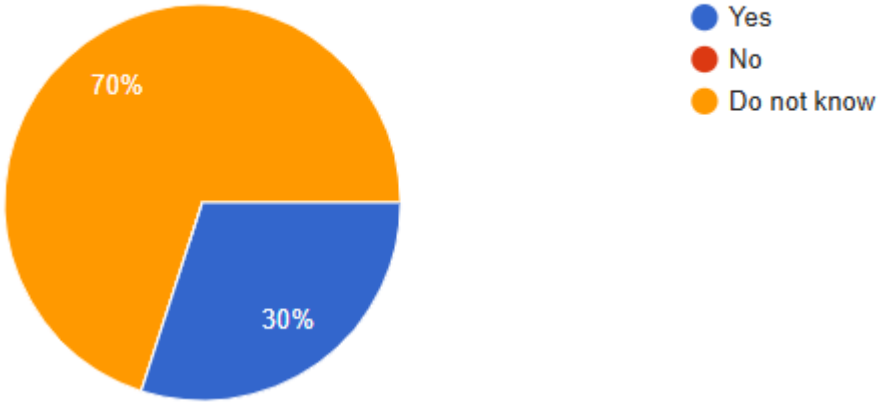
The bar chart illustrates the frequency of responses for various skills that respondents have prioritized. This chart indicates that the top skill preferred by respondents is Entrepreneurship or Freelancing (90%), followed by Communication and Soft Skills (80%). The least emphasized skill is Technical/Vocational Training (50%) and Other (10%).

4.7. Participants' preferred Career Development Support



It is clearly seen that the expectancy of internship opportunities is low (50%) among the respondents. Besides, accessible learning for job materials and **inclusive career counselling services** are also recommended by 50% and 40% of the respondents, respectively.

4.8. Participants' Belief Regarding the Success of NGOs in Inclusive Career Development



Unfortunately, 70% of the respondents are not sure about the role of the NGOs in providing the necessary support to ensure that career development is inclusive while the remaining 30% are sure about the capacity of an NGO in making career development inclusive.

5. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Based on the findings of this report, several key issues can be addressed for future interventions.

- In Figure 4.3, half of the students with disabilities at Rajshahi University report that they do not receive sufficient tailored support. Additionally, many perceive a gap in collaboration between the university and NGOs. While physical accessibility has shown improvement, there is still a need for more inclusive and thoughtful planning to address the remaining challenges.

- In the very next figure, the 90% students' preference on entrepreneurship or freelancing opportunities urges that BRAC could launch such training programs in her next project to facilitate this opportunity for the students with disabilities in Rajshahi University.

- The last figure (4.7) shows a discernible fact that students with disabilities are still not sure of NGOs capacity or technical support mechanism for inclusive career development. BRAC can facilitate a bunch of workshops and seminars in collaboration with Rajshahi University to inform them of the offered opportunity.

So, through the implementation of these recommendations, University and NGOs can collaborate the career support for the first-year students with disabilities at Rajshahi University and providing them with much better opportunities for career development and making a successful future.

6. CONCLUSION

This shows severe gaps in career awareness of current first-year disabled students at Rajshahi University. Although students reach university, most have little guidance, institutional support, and awareness of the career development projects organised by the NGO. This needs inclusive planning, targeted training programs, and stronger collaboration between universities and NGOs. These are the problems that empower students with disabilities to make wise decisions regarding their careers. It will help shape the good futures at stake when immediate action is taken by stakeholders like career counselling cells or NGOs.

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