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Impact of Field Visits on Students' Knowledge Towards Rural Development: An Empirical Study on Brac University

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Abstract

The education system of the 21st century mainly accentuates on pragmatic and collaborative learning where field trip is one of the most prominent methods of learning. Considering this, Brac University arranges a lot of experiential learning activities. Visiting different programs of BRAC is one of them where every student of the university is taken to observe the development trends in rural areas of Bangladesh. This study explores the impact of those visits. The methodology of this research includes both qualitative and quantitative approaches. A survey was conducted where 200 students were selected who visited programs of BRAC. Subsequently, a focus group discussion was arranged where 40 students had taken part. The study shows that this field visit helps students becoming more attached to villages, and it inhibits a sense of responsibility among many of them. This research may help policy makers to design their curriculum more effectively in the future.

Keywords: Field Visit, Experiential Learning, NGO, Rural Development, Learning Outcome

1. Introduction

As a teacher of the Bangladesh Studies course (currently renamed as the Emergence of Bangladesh) at Brac University, we have noticed that a good number of students coming from urban backgrounds are quite ignorant about rural development. It is also evident from different reports that young people living in urban areas express a less positive opinion on the quality of life in rural areas (European Survey, 2012). However, the contribution of agriculture to the GDP growth of Bangladesh is 14.10 percent (Dhaka Tribune, 2018). Therefore, it is assumed that knowledge about rural development can inspire young people both from urban and rural to contribute to the development of the country.

Through this research, we have tried to explore the impact of field visits, which is a part of the Bangladesh Studies course, on the students and how they learn about rural Bangladesh from this visit. Dillon et al. (2006) finds that the evidence from research carried out around the world is that fieldwork can have a range of

beneficial impacts on participants. Research by Dierking and Falk (1997) also found that 96 percent of a group (128 children and adults) could recall field trips taken during their early years at school. The BRAC program visit, which is a field visit, is designed to help students to learn about the rural development of Bangladesh.

The methodology of this research includes both qualitative and quantitative approaches. In the first phase, a survey was conducted where 200 students were selected who visited different programs of BRAC viz., microfinance, education, and health. Most of the structured questions were close-ended and others required respondents to give opinions. The second phase involves a focus group discussion where 40 students who visited those programs, based on random sampling, have taken part. During the focus group discussion, half of the students were taken from the group who visited once, and others were taken from the group who visited twice. Focus group discussion has allowed us to ask further questions and learn in detail about their impressions.

This research may direct future studies on the impact of other BRAC programs on students. It will also help policymakers to design the curriculum more effectively to make patriotic and responsible citizens, which is an aim of the Bangladesh Studies course.

1.2. Research area

To create a functional leader in society, Brac University Residential Semester has pioneered many activities which will help students to become an ideal citizens dedicated to his/her own country. This research aims to show how one of such activities e.g. BRAC visits having an impact on the students learning about rural development. Their understanding and motivation to work for rural development will be an important aspect of this research as well.

1.3. Literature review

The main chore of an academic institute is to create active learners who tend to take initiatives for the development of knowledge and human civilization. Keeping this in front, Brac University was established to produce the future leaders through creating a sense of responsibility among students so that they feel motivated to take initiatives for further development of the country. To achieve this goal and better learning outcomes, it arranges a lot of experiential learning activities along with classroom teaching. BRAC visit or trip is one of them where students are taken to different BRAC programs to observe and interact with all the stakeholders including service providers and beneficiaries. Before discussing the effectiveness of BRAC visits or trips, it may be relevant to focus a little on the effectiveness of field trips as a whole to make a better premise for an argument. A field trip is an academic visit to a designated place out of class to supplement classroom learning and cognitive sense of learners. Krepel and Duvall (1981) define a field trip as “a trip arranged by the academic institute and undertaken for educational purposes.” Krakowka (2012, p. 236) defined field trip as any learning experience that occurs outside a classroom. Sorrentino and Bell (1970, p. 233) tried to characterize field trips as a journey taken under the patronage of the academic institute for educational purposes. The main purpose of a field trip is to ensure better learning outcomes by arranging programs and activities for the students which allow them to be active learners instead of passive learners (Yusuf, 2006, p.7). Therefore, field trip has a huge role in student engagement and participatory learning.

However, field trip or visit has been used as a method of experiential learning at educational institutes for centuries. Even though this has always been taken as an integral way of learning, but there has not been initiated that much research to assess the effectiveness of field trips from an academic perspective. This trend of assessment on field trips mainly became popular in the 20th century. A considerable number of research on field trips have come into view over the past 50 years. Most of those researches have attempted to see whether and to what degree field trips contribute to learning, the factors that may contribute to such learning and the learning outcomes that can result from these experiences of visits. Much field trip related research in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s focused on the learning potential of informal learning environments like museums, zoos, planetarium or outdoor settings along with indoor teaching and learning (DeWitt & Storksdieck, 2008). Most of this research focused on cognitive or conceptual outcomes of field trips as a supplementary activity along with classroom

learning. The general consensus that emerged from this line of research was that under certain favorable circumstances, field trips might lead to somewhat better learning outcomes than classroom-based instruction (DeWitt & Storksdieck, 2008).

Field visit is an important way of learning where theoretical knowledge embraces practical knowledge and facilitate to develop learners' understanding of the particular field. Research indicates that field trips help students to sharpen their skills of observation and perception by utilizing all their senses (Nabors, Edwards, & Murray, 2009, p. 661). Students in field trips usually develop a positive attitude for learning through establishing connections between the theoretical concepts in the classroom and experiences from the visit (Hudak, 2003, p. 220). It also helps the learners to understand the past and present and influences them to take initiative in the future based on their experiences. Thus, learning from a field trip is not considered as merely an extension of classroom teaching, but as a valuable supplement to classroom instruction which also works as an effective way to prepare students for future learning. (Hofstein & Rosenfeld, 1996; Orion & Hofstein, 1994).

Brac University, along with its many other experiential learning activities, gives more importance on academic visits, viz. Liberation War Museum, Lalbagh Fort and Museum, BRAC program and many more. From a study on 100 students, these visits have been found effective in terms of achieving learning outcomes and cognitive changes in the mind of students. Especially, BRAC visit was identified by students as an effective way of knowing about the rural development of Bangladesh which motivates students to take initiatives in the future. In that study, around 82% of students who were taken to observe different BRAC programs showed a clear interest in working for the rural development of Bangladesh in their future careers. Most importantly, in the same study, a focus group discussion with current students and alumni was also carried out where many were found engaged in similar activities which they observed during their BRAC program visits. In that study, a clear and visible impact of BRAC visits was found among the students which also helped them in their academic and professional careers. Justin Dillon et al., (2006) reviewed many research into outdoor learning published between 1993 and 2003, and summarized that fieldwork, properly conceived, adequately planned, well taught and effectively followed up, offers learners opportunities to develop learner's knowledge and skills in ways that add value to their everyday experiences in the classroom. Therefore, a field trip is considered as a very effective way of learning.

1.4. Research question

The following questions had been considered by the researchers, regarding the impact of BRAC visits on the students.

- a) Does field visit to village (BRAC program visit) enhance students understanding about rural development?
- b) Does field visit to village (BRAC program visit) help to inhibit a sense of attachment to village?
- c) Does field visit to village (BRAC program visit) create enthusiasm among students to contribute to the rural development in the future?

1.5. Research hypothesis

Two hypotheses have been considered by the authors. These are:

- a) Students gather knowledge about rural development by interacting with the villagers and observing different activities of the programs during their field visits.
- b) A significant and positive impact is noticed on the students after the field visit.

2. Methodology

To conduct the research and to have the necessary understanding of the impact of field visit the authors had selected the BRAC program visit. They went through possible methods and techniques to collect data. By nature, the study focused on both qualitative (documents review and Focus Group Discussion) and quantitative (survey) approaches.

2.1. Sampling

In this study, for collecting data from students, 200 students were randomly selected who visited different programs of BRAC (microfinance, education, and health). Later, we conducted two focus group discussions where 40 students were randomly selected, and half of them were taken from the group who visited the program twice to compare between a single visit and visiting twice. The sample size of the research was 200.

2.2. Data collection tools

Survey by questionnaire. The researchers followed a questionnaire for collecting data where the participants were the students of fall 2016, Brac University. Altogether 200 students took part in the survey during the semester. The questionnaire had 12 questions *in combination of multiple choices, open-ended and positive to negative value-based questions.* *Before the students took part in the survey, they were well informed about the process. To ensure fairness, the participants were instructed not to write their names and identification number anywhere in the form.*

Focus Group Discussion. Two focus group discussions were arranged where 40 pupils were randomly selected who visited those programs, based on random sampling. Half of the students participated after one visit whereas the rest of them took part after the second visit. Focus group discussions allowed us to ask further questions and learn in detail about their impressions. It also helped us to compare the impact of field visits on those two groups of students.

2.3. Data analysis techniques

Microsoft Office Excel 2007 was applied to evaluate and interpret the data.

3. Findings and discussions

The analysis has been divided into two major segments. Firstly, quantitative analysis will be placed under the Survey Findings section. Secondly, qualitative analysis will be placed under the Focus Group Discussion section.

3.1. Survey findings

To inhibit a sense of attachment and responsibility to the country, all the students of Brac University are taken to observe different programs of BRAC, the largest NGO in the world (the daily star, 2018). as part of the Bangladesh Studies Course, all the students of fall 2016 visited different programs of BRAC and around 200 of them were randomly selected who visited BRAC Microfinance, Education, and Health program for this research. Besides, a group of students was also taken to visit those programs twice to identify the impact of visiting more than once. This research intended to check whether the visit experience influences students to be more attached to the village and rural development of Bangladesh or not. After the visit, they were asked to take part in a survey, and attend in a focus group discussion where they shared their experiences from the visit. From the study, it has been found that visit to different programs of BRAC enriches students' knowledge about rural development of Bangladesh in many ways. As it has been shown in the table 1, 38% of students did not even try to know about the rural development of Bangladesh before attending the BRAC visit. it indicates that a large number of students did not have any prior idea about the village areas of Bangladesh. After attending the visit, 81.5% confirmed that the visit helped them to know about the development trend in Bangladesh, especially in rural areas. A similar result was also found in another survey conducted at Brac university in 2017 where 100 participants were asked whether they had any prior idea about the rural development of Bangladesh or not. In that survey, 50% of students responded that they never tried to learn about the development of villages before going to the BRAC program visit. Interestingly, 44% of them were from urban areas (Shamsuddoha et al., 2018). It illustrates that urban students have even less idea about the rural life of Bangladesh. But it is really important to involve every citizen in the development process of a country irrespective to their origin.

Table 1: Students' idea about rural development

Questions	Response (%)			
	Yes	To some extent	No	No response
1. Did you ever try to learn about the development of villages before going on the BRAC visit?	24	37.5	38	0.5
2. Do you think the BRAC visit helped you to get some idea about the development of villages in Bangladesh?	81.5	16	1	1.5

Furthermore, students were able to observe the development trend in different sectors of village people during their visit which created a positive image of the village and its people in the mind of students. It has been reflected in the response of the students during the survey (see table 2) where 65% of participants affirmed that the rural people are aware of the advantage of sending their children to school. 45.5% of students thought people of the visited villages were aware of health issues and hygiene but 25.5% said they were not. After visiting the microfinance program of BRAC, 52% of students shared that vulnerable people of the village are getting microfinance facilities, and only 11% responded negative to this statement. Students were also asked a question about the economic condition of rural people where 86% of students denoted that they think the economic condition of rural people is improving.

Table 2: Students' idea about rural development in different sectors

Questions	Response after the visit (%)			
	Yes	Not sure	No	No response
1. Do you think rural people are aware of the advantages of sending their children to school?	65	21	13	1
2. Do you think rural people are aware of diseases and treatment for maternal health, tuberculosis, and eyesight problems?	45.5	28.5	25.5	0.5
3. Are vulnerable people getting the microfinance facilities?	52	34.5	11	2.5
4. Do you think that the economic condition of rural people is improving?	86	7	6	1

Bangladesh is a newborn country which does not even exceed half of a century but has successfully created an example in social development. Most notable achievements have been in the health and education sectors. Development in the health sector of Bangladesh has been stated as one of the great mysteries of global health (Riaz, 2016, p. 528). This social development especially in villages, has greatly contributed to change the economy of Bangladesh over the past five decades. As students observed the socio-economic condition of rural people, they were asked about the actor/s who helped to ensure development in the village. In response to this statement (Figure-1), 71% of students said both government and NGOs have ensured socio-economic development in villages whereas 26% confirmed that NGOs have contributed more to this process. This indicates that the BRAC visit helped students to know more about the development process of the country.

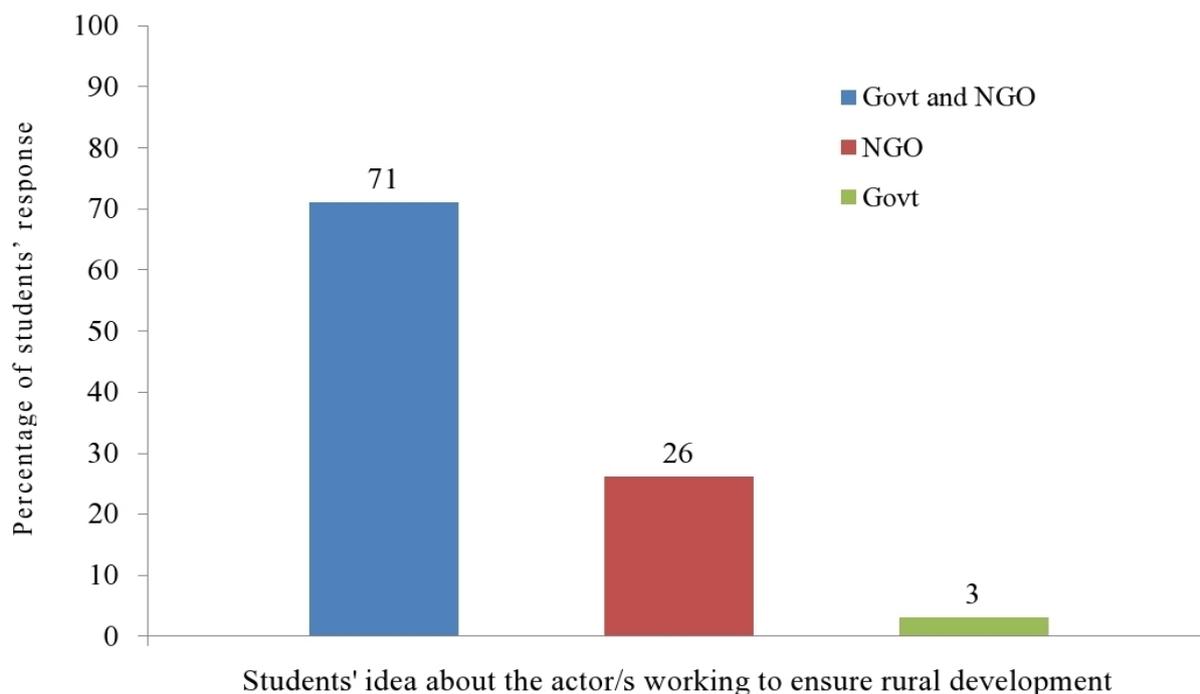


Figure 1: Actor/s working to ensure rural development

As it has been already described under the methodology, some students were taken to visit BRAC programs once and some were taken twice. During the survey both the groups were asked whether a single visit is enough or it requires more visits to BRAC programs to understand rural development. In response to this issue (Figure-2), 97% of students affirmed that a single visit is not enough to understand the rural development of Bangladesh, rather it requires more.

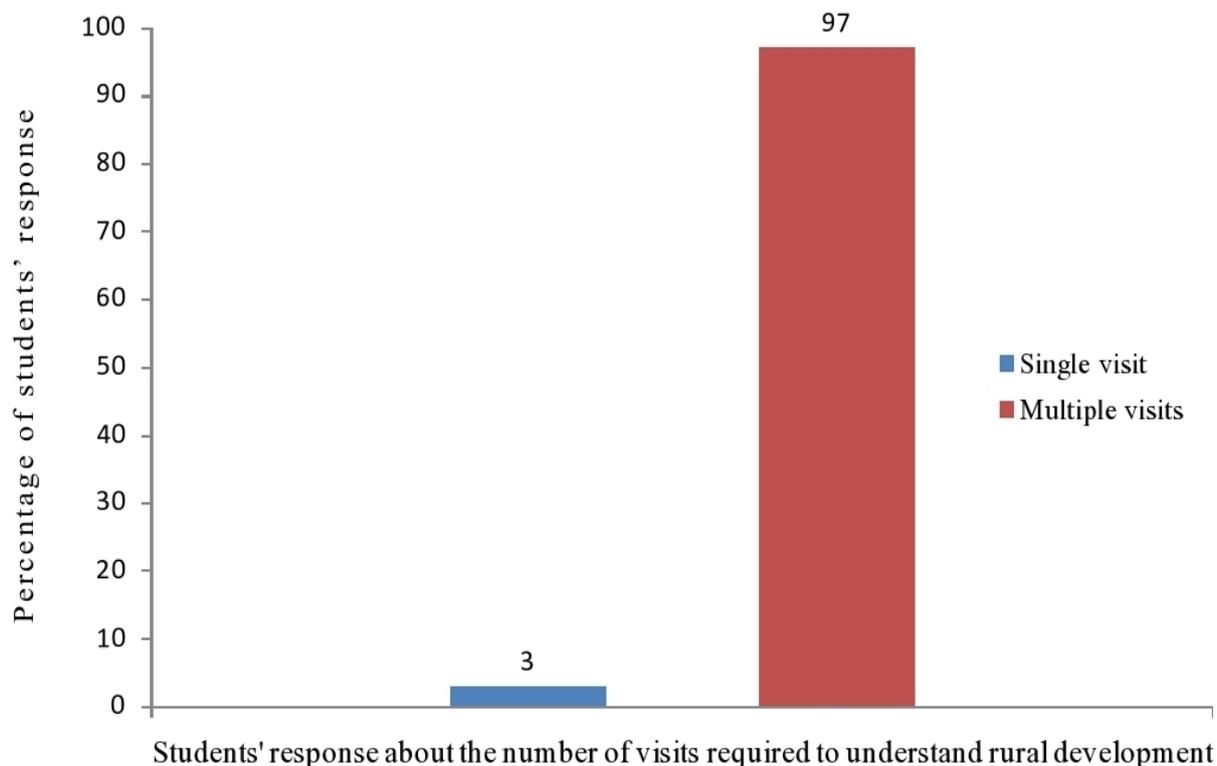


Figure 2: Number of visits required to understand rural development

From the survey, it has been found that most of the students got a clear idea about the rural condition of Bangladesh. Thus, they have been motivated to get involved in the development process of the country especially in rural areas. In a question during the survey, students were asked whether they felt interested in working for the rural development of Bangladesh in the future or not. In response to this question (Figure-3), 66% of them were found positive, 29% showed the possibility, and only 3-5% said they were not interested in working for the rural development. Hence, it has been found from the survey that the BRAC visit has successfully ignited the interest in the mind of most of the students to work for the rural development of Bangladesh in their future careers.

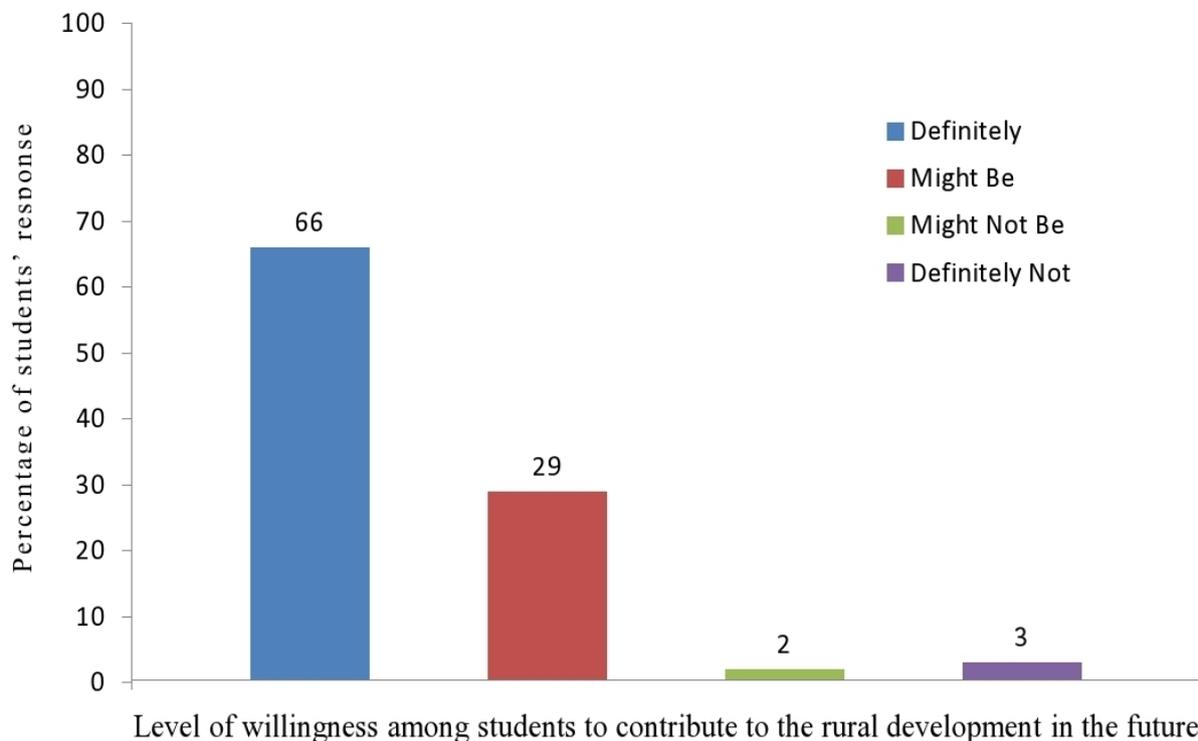


Figure 3: Willingness of students to contribute to the rural development

In each semester, Brac University Residential campus also conducts a campus-wide survey where all students are asked to evaluate the quality and effectiveness of different programs they have undergone. In that campus-wide survey (Campus Evaluation, 2016), 86.52% of students affirmed that the BRAC visit was a very effective way for them to explore the rural development in Bangladesh. This knowledge helps them to feel more attached to the rural areas and marginalized communities.

The study shows that BRAC visit enhances students learning about rural development of Bangladesh through motivation and effective engagement. It also helps them to find out the scope of their contribution to the country in the future. This is how visits or field trips create scope of cognitive understanding with long term effects.

3.2. Focus group discussion

As it has been already mentioned under methodology, 40 students were randomly selected for the focus group discussion from those 200 participants who took part in the survey. Out of that 40 people, 20 were taken for a follow-up (second time) visit to understand their depth of knowledge compared to them who visited once.

During the focus group discussion, we have found that a very few numbers of students (20%) had previous experience of visiting rural areas 7/8 years back to experience rural development in Bangladesh. They could easily compare the situation between now and then after the BRAC visit. Remarkable improvements in the standard of living, health, and education of the villagers were pointed out in their discussion. The followings are the program-wise findings from the discussion.

Education program. BRAC visit helped the students to understand the value of BRAC education program on the villagers which is significantly different than the formal primary schools in the country. The unique method of teaching through extra-curricular activities helps the village kids to understand the significance of teamwork, taking responsibilities for each other at this very young age that they learned at the university level. They appreciated the friendly environment and motivating mothers in the monthly meeting to keep the attendance rate higher in BRAC schools which is around 100%. Besides, considering the educational background of the parent's no new work is given to the kids at home. Students think that BRAC schools are also successful in PSC and supervising their students until the SSC level. BRAC's one teacher policy, flexible school timing and parents-teacher meeting ensure an effective academic relationship between the teacher and students. Moreover, basic foundation training has made the BRAC school teachers more capable than others. Students also pointed out that the student-friendly strategies of teaching have made the learning at BRAC School a lifetime experience for these first-generation learners. The students of BRAC School often take part in singing or dancing, recitation of rhymes and poems, storytelling, etc. that creates enthusiasm among them about learning new things. These village kids are more disciplined and cooperative with each other which they learn from different activities in the classroom. Students think that the focus on practical learning rather than bookish knowledge is one of the reasons behind this enthusiastic learning environment for which BRAC kids are even ready to sacrifice physical comfort. Comparing to other mainstream formal primary schools in the rural areas BRAC is successful in guiding its students along with setting a lifetime goal for them. Students believe that development is taking place in rural areas through this kind of creative education system. They further added that the leadership skill that the village kids are developing at this young age would help them to subsequently lead their area and country. Students also suggested that providing electricity in those schools would ensure a better environment.

Microfinance program. Students visited the microfinance program of BRAC with a stereotyped notion about the villagers, especially the women. But the visit helped them to understand the changes taking place in rural areas. They were surprised to see the village women under the microfinance program confident, responsible and independent. This program is empowering them, and women are getting most out of it. Since on many occasions, women become the source of money for the family, therefore they earn respect and become a part of the decision-making process in the family which was quite impossible before. Students found that the microfinance program helped to create female entrepreneurs in society. It has some social impact as well e.g. the number of divorces and domestic violence decreased a lot. Besides, students had found the village women more conscious about their health, children's education, the standard of living and future-plan like many educated families in urban areas. The program has brought changes in their perspective and now they work as a change maker. Customer-friendly strategies, flexibility, availability have made the system convenient for both the rural men and women. The villagers found the system simple, transparent and better than other organizations. Students feel that this program is thus contributing to the overall development of the country. Apart from this, students think that the loan range might be higher for Dabi along with extended time duration for payment.

Health program. Students were unaware of the development of the health sector in the rural areas since health is the least prioritized area in the village life. They appreciated the concept of health workers very much who have become successful to make the village women talk about their health issues. Now village women are getting services at their doorstep and conscious about nutrition, diet, and other health issues. BRAC's provision of low-cost basic healthcare, maternal health, nutrition program, tuberculosis program, eye care, etc. is contributing to the overall development of the country.

The students think that these kinds of initiatives in the rural areas are necessary to have proper maintenance of manpower in the country. To ensure sustainable development we need to focus on the rural areas and proper decentralization is important. Thus, we can ensure social, economic and political sustainability in the country and lessen the burden on the capital. A number of them also felt encouraged to work for the rural areas in the future after the visit.

To make the BRAC visit more effective students suggested that all students need to visit all the programs. If it's not possible then at least visiting three of the programs i.e. Microfinance, education, and health is important. Because these three programs of BRAC are connected and bring changes in a holistic approach.

A day-long visit and face to face interaction with the villagers can play a major role in the learning of the students. It is better to have a surprise visit to the villages to see how different components of the programs are working.

This scope of learning rural Bangladesh should not be limited to Residential Semester only; initiatives must be there to continue at the main campus in Mohakhali (urban campus). There might be a club at the main campus for the interested students to contribute to the well-being of the rural people. Even students can have research on rural areas and make documentaries in every two semesters. Students can also be encouraged to take projects on rural development under other courses and go for publication. Those who are interested must be given a guideline to move forward.

Through focus group discussion with the students, it was understood that being a part of the urban community they were very much unaware about the overall development taking place in the rural areas. They had stereotyped ideas which were changed after interacting with the villagers. The visit was successful to make some of them interested to work in this field in the future. Another major finding is that after one visit though 97% students felt that two days visit is important but those who (20 students) visited twice found that one-day-long visit is enough to get an idea about the programs. Nevertheless, it has been clear from this study that field visit has a very positive impact, and it creates scope of cognitive understanding with long term effects on the mind of students.

4. Conclusion

The modern education system emphasizes on visualization and practical learning which can be achieved through field visit. In a field trip, students learn from their own observation and motivation which can achieve more learning outcomes. Keeping this in mind, Brac University arranges a lot of field visits and experiential learning activities along with classroom teaching. BRAC program visit is one of them, which tries to create a sense of belongingness and responsibility among the next generation. The present study mainly tried to analyze whether BRAC visit leaves a positive impact on students' attitude towards the development of rural areas of Bangladesh or not. It has been found that BRAC visit helps to create a sense of attachment and responsibility to the socio-economic development of the country as a large number of students shared that they want to contribute for the rural development of Bangladesh in future. The study also shows that learning from field visit is very long-lasting with far-reaching effects.

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