REFORMING BANGLADESH CIVIL SERVICE: STUDENT PERCEPTION ON RECRUITMENT EFFECTIVENESS

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ABSTRACT

The recruitment process of the Bangladesh Civil Service is a highly competitive and multi-stage examination system to recruit merit-based candidates for public administrative services. This research aims to evaluate university students' perceptions of the effectiveness of the Bangladesh civil service recruitment process, specifically addressing fairness, transparency, and trust. This study employed a mixed-methods approach to evaluate perceptions among university students. A sample of 380 respondents provided quantitative data through a survey questionnaire. Qualitative data were obtained through 5 key informant interviews (KIIs) and in-depth interviews with 20 participants, including BCS exam participants and students. Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS version 25, applying descriptive statistics and the chi-square test. The results showed that, although opinions are generally quite positive, significant disparities still existed. BCS aspirants were strongly supportive of the idea of making marks public ($p < .01$), and students were concerned about the mismatch between the content of tests and job relevance ($p = .030$). The degree of trust depended on the institution type and the region, particularly on the fairness of the viva voce and the publication timeline of the results. Future BCS reform should focus on making marks public, reducing the bias of viva voce, ensuring test content is relevant to fundamental job skills, and ensuring the availability of a complaints process. These steps are crucial in establishing trust and achieving meritocratic outcomes.

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KEYWORDS

BCS Recruitment, Effectiveness, Fairness, Student Perception, Transparency.

INTRODUCTION

The Bangladesh civil service included certain classes of service for which recruitment occurred via open competitive exams, including preliminary, written, and viva voce assessments administered by the Bangladesh Public Service Commission (BPSC). The British colonial authority originally launched the current civil service system in South Asia. Following the inception of the British East India Company, the eventual imposition of direct British Crown governance in 1858 marked a turning point. The Indian Civil Service (ICS), renowned for its rigorous examination procedures and prestigious standing, was established to govern colonial India effectively (Mishra, 2013). The ICS was once limited to British citizens, with tests conducted in London, excluding Indians. Nevertheless, after the emergence of political pressure and social reform movements, Indians faced restricted prospects in the late nineteenth century (Babu, 2022). The ICS evolved into a mechanism of colonial rule and elitism. Following the partition of British India in 1947, India and Pakistan inherited and modified the ICS framework to suit their national contexts. East Pakistan, which later became Bangladesh in 1971, retained the governmental framework established by Pakistan. Cadre service in Bangladesh was first formally acknowledged in 1981, when BCS recruiting criteria were adopted, and the first BCS examination was conducted in 1982 (Abdullah Kaiser, 2015). The Bangladesh Civil Service Rules 2014 are being followed for direct recruitment. Currently, there are twenty-six cadres within the Bangladesh Civil Service. Among them, ten cadres are general, twelve cadres are technical, and four cadres hold both general and technical roles.

The BCS examination has become overly focused on rote memorisation, with most candidates relying on study aids and reproducing answers mechanically. The BCS exam question papers lack sufficient depth to identify qualified candidates for the cadre service effectively (Jahan, 2006). Serious allegations of exam paper leaks have been made against the Bangladesh Public Service Commission (BPSC). The BPSC cancelled the 24th BCS preliminary examination due to the leaks of question papers (The Daily Star, August 11, 2003). The BPSC identified that repeat cadre allocations impoverished new and waiting candidates for opportunities and hindered effective recruitment (Rabbani, 2025). The interview or viva voce phase is frequently criticised for being liable to subjective bias, which imperils the objectivity of applicant assessment (Jahan, 2012). Additionally, most test questions are descriptive and often lack the analytical depth necessary to assess candidates' critical thinking and problem-solving abilities (Jahan, 2006). Inefficient hiring and selection practices can lead to several problems for the country, including poor public service performance, increased corruption, and inefficient bureaucracy. Despite its theoretical soundness, this system has drawn much criticism due to its excessive length, reliance on memorisation, and perceived ambiguity (Hasan et al., 2022).

This study aims to assess students' perceptions of the effectiveness of the Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) recruitment process, to inform policymakers on how to enhance its efficacy and transparency. By investigating the perceptions of university students and BCS applicants, the study helps determine the advantages and disadvantages of the current system (Hasan et al., 2022). A successful recruitment process has several benefits. It enables the selection of qualified candidates, fostering effective governance and improved public service provision (Babu, 2022). A merit-based system also promotes justice and transparency, which in turn reduces corruption and enhances public confidence (Maheshwari, 2005). Additionally, it strengthens public service by placing capable individuals in critical roles. The competitive nature of the hiring process may cause applicants to feel more stressed (Babu, 2022).

Furthermore, placing too much emphasis on academic degrees could obscure the value of practical experience, thereby reducing the range of skills available in the public sector (Maheshwari, 2005). Therefore, striking a balance between merit and diversity is necessary to improve the BCS hiring process.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The primary objective of this study is to assess students' perceptions of recruitment effectiveness.

The other objectives are:

1. To identify the key barriers to the effectiveness of the BCS recruitment system in Bangladesh.

2. To analyse the key factors that influence the effectiveness of the BCS recruitment system.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the world, there have been changes in the recruitment procedures of civil services, shifting from politically oriented recruitments to merit-based and framework-driven systems. Such misuse of authority occurred in countries such as the United States, where the spoils system was employed, meaning that Government jobs were distributed as political favours (Van Riper, 1958). The patronage and ineffective system were reshaped with the Pendleton Civil Service Act of 1883, which established merit-based employee hiring practices, competitive examinations, and the security of tenure for federal workers (U.S. Office of Personnel Management [OPM], 2023). European Personnel Selection Office (EPSO) controls centralised recruitment for other institutions (European Commission and European Parliament). EPSO combines multiple selection stages and minimises the use of computer-based testing, assessment centres, and structured interviews in making all appointments, with multilingual competency and diversity as key considerations (EPSO, 2024). The South Korean form of recruitment into the public administration is heavily exam-based, with its origins in the Confucian tradition of the Gwageo. The national civil service exam consists of various steps, including the Public Service Aptitude Test (PSAT), written tests, and interviews, which is why it is one of the most rigorous systems in the world (Lee, S. Y., 2014). Civil service in Japan is also divided into levels of exams (Level I, Level II, Level III), with the Level I exam typically resulting in recruitment to policy-making positions. The selection procedure is based on written exams and personal interviews (National Personnel Authority of Japan, 2023).In South Asia, the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) of India conducts one of the most extensive examinations in the country in terms of the number of candidates. It involves preliminary filtering, written tests, and character tests, where calls to modify the system to be efficient and representative increase (Subbarao, 2024). Pakistan has a similar three-tier structure, as outlined by the Federal Public Service Commission (FPSC), through which entries are made for the CSS, and lateral entry routes are suggested for domain experts (Rana, 2022).

The history of civil service in Bangladesh dates to the British colonial era, particularly with the establishment of the Indian Civil Service (ICS) under the Government of India Act, 1858, which introduced a structured administrative approach for governing British India (Misra, 1977). The ICS existed, characterised by elitism, centralisation, and an orientation toward development administration (Jahan, 2006). Following the partition of India, this part of India was allocated to East Bengal (later East Pakistan) to form part of Pakistan, and the colonial civil service pattern was replaced by the Central Superior Services (CSS) of Pakistan. With the declaration of independence of Bangladesh in 1971, a new civil service system was established to meet the demands of a sovereign and developing state. The Civil Servants Order (1972) was first enacted, which transformed the established

administrative framework by dissolving the senior categories of services in the Pakistani framework, along with merging the single structure of the Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS).

The Bangladesh Civil Service was officially established in 1981, when the system of BCS Examination was introduced, uniting various specialised cadres (e.g., Administration, Foreign Affairs, Police, Customs, Health) through a standardised recruitment process. There are three tests: the Preliminary Examination, the Written Examination, and the Viva Voce, which candidates must pass (BPSC, 2023; Jahan, 2006). Despite this system's merit-based performance, several challenges persist, including the problems of politicisation, a quota-based recruitment system, and a lack of transparency and fairness (Haque & Mohammad, 2013).

The recruitment system in the Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) is an inclusive and multi-staged process managed by the Bangladesh Public Service Commission (BPSC) to ensure a merit-based and transparent selection of candidates for various cadres (BPSC, 2023). The exercise begins with the issuance of an official recruitment circular, which contains information on available vacancies, the application requirements, the application procedures, and the deadline. The desired applicants apply online, and their details are checked for basic eligibility, such as educational qualifications and age range (BPSC, 2023). Eligible students sit in the Preliminary Examination, a 200-mark (multiple choice) test in Bangla, English, general knowledge, mathematics, mental ability, ICT, ethics, and governance. This is a preliminary examination to qualify the candidates who will proceed to the second stage (BPSC, 2023; Jahan, 2006). The successful candidates undergo the Written Examination, which has a mark range of 900 to 1100, depending on the cadre. Written examinations for general cadre candidates evaluate them in subjects such as Bangla, English, Bangladesh Affairs, International Affairs, and optional subjects. In contrast, candidates in technical or professional cadres are evaluated on subjects specific to the subject of study they have undertaken (Siddiqui, 2006). The Viva Voce is an oral interview (carried out before a panel of senior bureaucrats and experts) worth 200 points. It is held only after successful candidates have passed the examination, testing their communication skills, leadership potential, ethical reasoning ability, and personality traits. After the viva, BPSC prepares a final merit list upon adding the numbers of the written examination score board and oral interview; the preliminary exam results are not included in the calculation. Cadre allocation is, in turn, done based on this final ranking, their cadre preferences, and quotas (BPSC, 2023; World Bank, 2018). Candidates are then subjected to neonatal and criminal verification tests to ensure they are fit both physically and morally, before they are officially hired. Lastly, appointees undergo basic training at institutions such as the Bangladesh Public Administration Training Centre (BPATC) or those trained in cadre-specific academies, based on the cadre to be assigned (Jahan, 2006).

Competency-based recruitment ensures that the selected individuals are not only qualified on paper but also possess the practical skills and behavioural attributes necessary to perform effectively in the job (Singh & Pathak, 2018). By focusing on competencies, organisations can improve the quality of recruitment, reduce employee turnover, and enhance overall organisational performance (Tripathi & Agrawal, 2014). CBR has focused on hiring recruits who possess a set of defined competencies, including leadership, teamwork, problem-solving, and ethical behaviour, rather than relying solely on performance scores or intelligence tests (McClelland, 1973). The intellectual groundwork of this method is established through the theory of competency terms introduced by David C. McClelland, who believed that conventional aptitude and intelligence tests were ineffective in predicting job success, especially in the public sector. He recommended that employees use structured interviews to

identify and measure latent personalities that translate into excellent performance, which he termed pools of competencies (McClelland, 1973). Boyatzis (1982) further operationalised this view by developing one of the initial competency models that specifically fit the performance of managers working in both private and Government institutions.

Competency-based recruitment systems are being implemented by countries such as the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and Singapore in civil service arenas worldwide to enhance the quality, fairness, and performance of civil servants (OECD, 2010; Ingraham et al., 2000). According to Campion et al. (2011), the following are some of the benefits of CBR: increased predictive validity, reduced hiring bias, improved cultural compatibility, and increased levels of retention. According to empirical studies, organisations that apply competency-based models report an improvement in workforce planning and lower turnover, especially in knowledge-based and management positions (Breaugh, 2008). Reflecting on the current policy discourses and research on this topic, the switch to the competency-based model in BCS may result in greater effectiveness of efforts to recruit BCS staff because it is possible to reinforce it by referring to the principles of meritocracy, equity, and the results of service delivery (World Bank, 2018).

However, the challenges of conducting competency-based models in Bangladesh are imminent. These include the intrusion of politics, the inability to perform in human resource departments, obsolete rules and regulations, and the unwillingness of stakeholders who benefit from the current system (UNDP, 2015; Zafarullah, 2008). Unless these obstacles are overcome, they can make any reform of BCS recruitment superficial. Nevertheless, when used strategically, the competency-based recruitment process can serve as a pillar towards civil service performance, integrity, and innovation in Bangladesh.

RESEARCH GAP

Numerous studies have been conducted on hiring practices in the public sector of Bangladesh; however, most of the existing literature focuses on the problems that policymakers and civil servants encounter, such as corruption and institutional reform. However, there is not much academic interest in what university students think, especially those who might be interested in joining the Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS). It is essential to understand how students feel, as they are the future workforce and are directly impacted by hiring practices and changes. Despite recent innovations such as online applications, digitised exam procedures, and transparency tools in the recruitment system, limited research explores how these changes are perceived by students in terms of fairness, accessibility, and effectiveness. By incorporating the views of students, this research offers a fresh and underexplored perspective that can inform more inclusive and effective civil service recruitment reforms in Bangladesh.

Methodology of the Study

This study employs a mixed-method approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative methodologies within a single research framework. This approach combines quantitative survey and qualitative thematic analysis.

The study adopted a structured questionnaire survey, which was circulated online (Google Forms) and on paper. It used Likert-scale-rated questions to assess students' perception of fairness, transparency, and trust about the recruitment system, along with open-ended questions to prompt their personal opinions. Additionally, in-depth interviews and Key Informant Interviews were conducted to gather students' perceptions and insiders' views on fairness, transparency, and trust regarding the recruitment system.

To ensure the universality of the sample in students' perceptions regarding the recruitment effectiveness of BCS, the research is conducted in three geographically distinct

regions of Bangladesh: urban, semi-urban, and rural areas. Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh, served as the centre of the urban element in the research work. Cumilla is classified as a semi-urban location, which highlights the growth of educational infrastructure and the practical significance of non-capital cities. Considering the inclusion of perceptions from students of rural origin, Dinajpur, one of the northeastern districts of Bangladesh, falls within the sampling frame.

Given the unknown total population of BCS aspirants and relevant university students, the Yamane (1967) formula has been applied to calculate the appropriate sample size:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(0.05)^2}$$

According to this formula, we needed 399 respondents to justify the study. Thus, this study targeted more than 399 respondents. To enhance data reliability and allow for potential non-response, a sample of 405 people was selected.

This research employed a multi-stage proportionate sampling strategy, which included stratified random sampling, cluster sampling, and purposive sampling. Stratified random sampling was used to ensure diversity in terms of gender, university type, and academic discipline. The cluster sampling analysis was applicable in selecting academic institutions in the urban, semi-urban, and rural areas. Purposive sampling was used to recruit key informants for the qualitative part of the research. The key informants were chosen based on their experience and participation in the recruitment of civil service, education, or policy.

Descriptive statistics and chi-square analysis were performed using SPSS version 25 software to examine the relationships between students' backgrounds and their views on recruitment fairness. For qualitative responses, statement analysis was conducted to identify key concerns that the BCS recruitment process included ideas associated with fairness, transparency, and trust in recruitment. Triangulation was applied to improve the reliability and validity of the findings. This was done by comparing the quantitative survey data findings with the qualitative interview data.

The research was conducted in accordance with strict ethical standards to ensure fair and responsible research practices. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and anonymity was maintained to protect their privacy. Participation in the study was voluntary. The study adhered to institutional ethics standards in protecting the integrity, openness, and confidentiality of the data.

CONCEPTUAL AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

In this study, competency-based recruitment (CBR) is the independent variable, grounded in the works of McClelland (1973) and Boyatzis (1982), and operationalised through three interrelated dimensions: fairness, transparency, and trust.
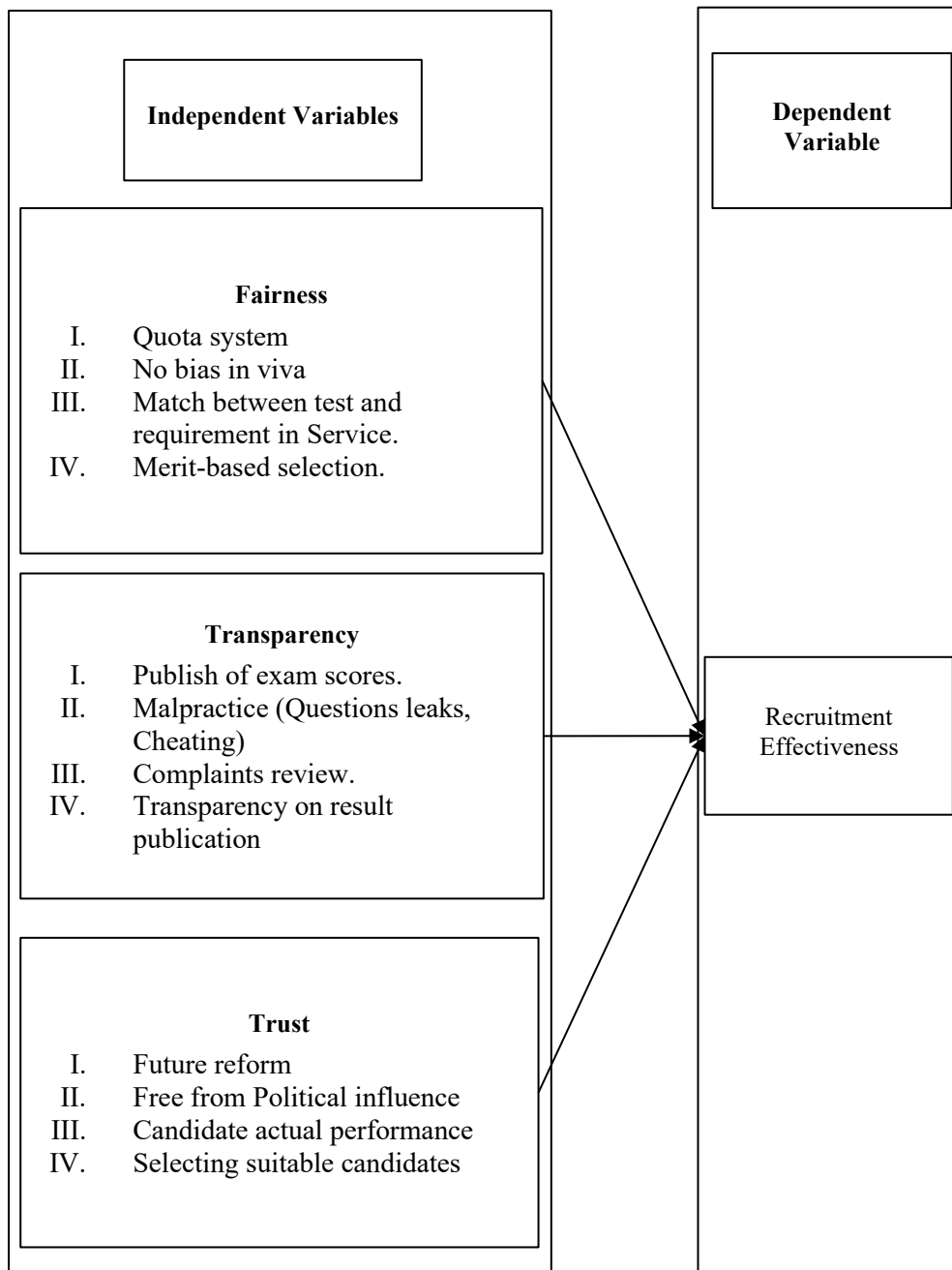
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│  ┌─────────────────────────┐         │   │  ┌──────────────────┐   │
│  │  Independent Variables  │         │   │  │    Dependent     │   │
│  └─────────────────────────┘         │   │  │    Variable      │   │
│                                      │   │  └──────────────────┘   │
│  ┌─────────────────────────────┐     │   │                         │
│  │         Fairness            │     │   │                         │
│  │   I.   Quota system         │     │   │                         │
│  │   II.  No bias in viva      │     │   │                         │
│  │   III. Match between test   │     │   │                         │
│  │        and requirement in   │     │   │                         │
│  │        Service.             │     │   │                         │
│  │   IV.  Merit-based          │     │   │                         │
│  │        selection.           │     │   │                         │
│  └─────────────────────────────┘     │   │  ┌──────────────────┐   │
│                                      │   │  │   Recruitment    │   │
│  ┌─────────────────────────────┐     │   │  │   Effectiveness  │   │
│  │       Transparency          │─────┼──▶│  │                  │   │
│  │   I.   Publish of exam      │     │   │  └──────────────────┘   │
│  │        scores.              │     │   │                         │
│  │   II.  Malpractice          │     │   │                         │
│  │        (Questions leaks,    │     │   │                         │
│  │        Cheating)            │     │   │                         │
│  │   III. Complaints review.   │     │   │                         │
│  │   IV.  Transparency on      │     │   │                         │
│  │        result publication   │     │   │                         │
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│  │          Trust              │     │   │                         │
│  │   I.   Future reform        │     │   │                         │
│  │   II.  Free from Political  │     │   │                         │
│  │        influence            │     │   │                         │
│  │   III. Candidate actual     │     │   │                         │
│  │        performance          │     │   │                         │
│  │   IV.  Selecting suitable   │     │   │                         │
│  │        candidates           │     │   │                         │
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Fig 2: Effectiveness of Recruitment and Selection practices (Muna, Ferdous, Azam, & Albattat, 2020)

Fairness and Recruitment Effectiveness

Fairness in recruitment refers to the consistent application of merit-based criteria, ensuring that all candidates receive equal opportunities, regardless of their background or personal connections. McClelland (1973) emphasised that recruitment decisions should be grounded

in demonstrable competencies rather than irrelevant attributes, thereby reducing bias and increasing the likelihood of appointing the most capable candidates. Mebom(2024) argues that the merit-based recruitment and selection of applicants for public service should be prioritised above quota-based recruitment in order to enhance competency. To guarantee fairness, viva voce or interview-based tests should be organised, criterion-referenced, and applicant-friendly (Kanerva et al., 2010). The systematic use of these merit-based criteria is directly related to the fairness of recruitment and selection (Bano et al., 2024).

Transparency and Recruitment Effectiveness

Transparency involves making recruitment procedures, criteria, and outcomes accessible and understandable to all stakeholders. Boyatzis (1982) noted that clarity in performance expectations and selection standards promotes accountability and supports the accurate matching of candidates to roles. Transparent recruitment processes reduce suspicions of malpractice, strengthen institutional credibility, and encourage more involvement by qualified applicants. Transparent procedures and clear, job-related criteria increase applicants' trust and acceptance of results. (Grimmelikhuijsen, 2014)

Trust and Recruitment Effectiveness

Trust is the confidence stakeholders place in the integrity, impartiality, and professionalism of the recruitment authority. According to Boyatzis (1982), trust is cultivated when recruitment bodies act consistently with ethical standards and safeguard the process from undue or external political influence. High trust levels encourage talented individuals to participate, knowing their efforts will be fairly evaluated and recognised. Transparency and trust are increased when selection information is openly disclosed (Alessandro et al., 2021). Employees' public service motivation and perceptions of procedural fairness are associated with citizen trust in Government outcomes; fair recruitment strengthens both internal norms and external trust. (Jensen, 2024).

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Demographic Profile						
Age	Criteria	**Below 20**	**20-24**	**25-29**	**30 and above**	**Total**
	Frequency	4	233	132	11	380
	Percentage (%)	1.1	61.3	34.7	2.9	100.0
Gender	Criteria	**Male**		**Female**		**Total**
	Frequency	202		178		380
	Percentage (%)	53.2		46.8		100.0

Educational Qualification	Criteria	**1st year**	**2nd year**	**3rd year**	**4th year**	**Graduated**	**Masters**	**Post graduated**	**Total**
	Frequency	27	43	60	121	46	37	46	380

	Perce ntage (%)	7.1	11.3	15.8	31.9	12.1		9.7		12.1	100.0
University Type	Type	**Public**			**Private**			**National**			**Total**
	Frequency	176			113			91			380
	Percentage (%)	46.3			29.8			23.9			100.0
Field of Study	Subject	**Social Science**	**Business Administration**		**Engineering/Technology**		**Medical Science**	**Law**	**Science**	**Arts**	**Total**
	Frequency	180	81		65		10	07	14	23	380
	Percentage (%)	47.4	21.3		17.1		2.6	1.8	3.7	6.1	100.0
Region of Residence	Area	**Rural**			**Semi-Urban**			**Urban**			**Total**
	Frequency	88			84			208			380
	Percentage (%)	23.2			22.1			54.7			100.0
BCS Aspirant	Response	**Yes**			**No**			**Maybe**			**Total**
	Frequency	153			119			108			380
	Percentage (%)	40.3			31.3			28.4			100.0

To assess opinions regarding the effectiveness of recruitment in the Bangladeshi civil service, 380 students participated in the survey. Most respondents (61.3%) fell within the 20 -24 age range. The next largest group (34.7%) consisted of individuals between the ages of 25 and 29. Only 2.9% were over 30, and 1.1% were under 20 years old. The sample consisted of 46.8% females and 53.2% males. Based on the respondents' educational backgrounds, most of them (31.9%) were in their 4th year of study. The following most common groups were third-year students (15.8%) and second-year students (11.3%). 12% of the students had already graduated or were in graduate school, 9.7% held a master's degree, and 7.1% were first-year students. 46.3% of all responders worked for public institutions, 29.8% worked for private universities, and 23.9% worked for national universities. 47.4% of the respondents were in the social sciences, followed by business administration (21.3%) and engineering/technology (17.1%). There were smaller percentages of people who studied arts (6.1%), science (3.7%), medical science (2.6%), and law (1.8%). 54.7% lived in cities, 23.2% in rural areas, and 22.1%

in semi-urban areas. 40.3% of the 380 people who responded said they wanted to become a BCS student, 31.3% said they did not, and 28.4% were unsure.

Assessment of Student Perceptions on BCS Recruitment Effectiveness

Fairness in the BCS Recruitment System							
The quota system in recruitment does not undermine merit-based selection.	Scale	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
	Frequency	101	141	63	52	23	380
	Percentage (%)	26.6	37.1	16.6	13.7	6.1	100.0
Viva voce interviews are free from personal bias.	Scale	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
	Frequency	62	137	87	83	11	380
	Percentage (%)	16.3	36.1	22.9	21.8	2.9	100.0
Do you think there is a mismatch between what BCS tests and what the public service requires?	Scale	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
	Frequency	17	45	83	171	64	380
	Percentage (%)	4.5	11.8	21.8	45.0	16.8	100.0
The BCS recruitment system ensures a merit-based selection process.	Scale	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
	Frequency	44	92	80	146	18	380
	Percentage (%)	11.6	24.2	21.1	38.4	4.7	100.0

Out of the participants, 101 (26.6%) strongly agreed and 141 (37.1%) agreed, 52 (13.7%) disagreed, 23 (6.1%) strongly disagreed, while 63 (16.6%) stayed neutral.
One person who took part in the interview said about the quota system,

> *"One important change would be to get rid of the quota system that makes candidates unequal."*

A total of 199 people (52.4%) either strongly disagreed (62,16.3%) or disagreed (137, 36.1%) that the interviews are free of personal bias. At the same time, 87 (22.9%) remained neutral, 83 (21.8%) agreed, and 11 (2.9%) strongly agreed, totalling 24.7% of a positive perception.

One of the interview respondents-

"The current BCS system focuses too heavily on rote memorisation of facts and does not assess the practical and analytical skills that are necessary for effective governance. Instead of just testing candidates on knowledge that is not useful in the real world, we should start judging them on their critical thinking, problem-solving, and leadership skills.

146 (38.4%) agreed and 18 (4.7%) strongly agreed, resulting in a 43.1% positive response. However, 92 (24.2%) disagreed, 44 (11.6%) strongly disagreed, and 80 (21.1%) were neutral, suggesting a moderately divided opinion.

One of the people who spoke up during the discussion said that—

"The recruitment process is not completely fair; there are big holes in how clear it is. One of the main worries is the strong political influence that is present during the police verification process. For instance, Shubham Chakma, one of my students, passed the 41st BCS exam but was later disqualified during police verification just because of his father's political background. Additionally, the viva board often exhibits a form of unintentional bias, where candidates from top universities, such as BUET, DU, CU, JU, and RU, are given an implicit preference. BUET graduates are the most common candidates for BCS jobs, while people with technical skills tend to move to general cadres. This trend can be explained by the value people place on civil service jobs in society, cultural factors, and the fact that people quickly recognise civil service roles." (KII No 01)

Transparency in the BCS Recruitment Process						
Should the marks of the preliminary, written, and viva stages be publicly disclosed for each candidate?	Scale	**Strongly Disagree**	**Disagree**	**Neutral**	**Agree**	**Strongly Agree**	**Total**
	Frequency	11	29	58	157	125	380
	Percentage (%)	2.9	7.6	15.3	41.3	32.9	100.0
There are minimal reported incidents of exam malpractice (e.g., leaks, cheating).	Scale	**Strongly Disagree**	**Disagree**	**Neutral**	**Agree**	**Strongly Agree**	**Total**
	Frequency	28	93	73	163	23	380
	Percentage (%)	7.4	24.5	19.2	42.9	6.1	100.0
Complaint or appeal mechanisms are in place and functional.	Scale	**Strongly Disagree**	**Disagree**	**Neutral**	**Agree**	**Strongly Agree**	**Total**
	Frequency	33	103	142	96	06	380
	Percentage (%)	8.7	27.1	37.4	25.3	1.6	100.0
Results are published transparentl	Scale	**Strongly Disagree**	**Disagree**	**Neutral**	**Agree**	**Strongly Agree**	**Total**
	Frequency	70	153	73	73	11	380

y and promptly.	Percentage (%)	18.4	40.3	19.2	19.2	2.9	100.0

A total of 282 people (74.2%) either agreed (157, 41.3%) or strongly agreed (125, 32.9%) that preliminary, written, and viva marks should be made public. At the same time, 29 (7.6%) disagreed, 11 (2.9%) strongly disagreed, and 58 (15.3%) were neutral.

One of the respondents who answered the interview said this about how clear the exam scores are:

"I would suggest setting up a system where detailed results from every stage (preliminary, written, viva) are made public to make things clearer. This would include the candidates' scores and a detailed breakdown of their performance on each part of the test. It would make it less of a mystery how candidates are judged, making sure they are held accountable and giving them a clear idea of how they can do better on future tests."

A total of 186 respondents (49.0%) believed that malpractice incidents (such as cheating and question leaks) are rare. One hundred sixty-three respondents (42.9%) agreed, and 23 respondents (6.1%) strongly agreed. On the other hand, 93 (24.5%) disagreed, 28 (7.4%) strongly disagreed, and 73 (19.2%) stayed neutral.

One person who took part in the interview talked about BCS's bad behaviour-

"The lack of openness in question paper security is one of the biggest problems with the current system. Question paper leaks undermine the integrity of the recruitment process, and without strict security, candidates cannot be assured that they are being evaluated fairly and objectively."

Only 96 (25.3%) agreed and 6 (1.6%) strongly agreed that these mechanisms are functional, forming a total of 26.9% support. On the other hand, 103 (27.1%) disagreed, 33 (8.7%) strongly disagreed, and 142 (37.4%) stayed neutral.

One person who took part in the research said,

"I would suggest creating a centralised online platform where candidates can see how their application is doing in real time. Digital tools can also help maintain transparency by eliminating paperwork and manual processes, which can often be prone to errors or manipulation."

Two hundred twenty-three respondents (58.7%) either disagreed (153, 40.3%) or strongly disagreed (70, 18.4%) with the statement. Only 73 respondents (19.2%) agreed, 11 respondents (2.9%) strongly agreed, and 73 respondents (19.2%) were neutral.

One of the respondents who answered the interview said-

"Being clear about the timeline for hiring is also part of being open. Candidates are frustrated by the delays and are unsure when the results will be announced. This makes things even more confusing."

Trust in the BCS Recruitment System							
I am confident that future reforms will improve the integrity of the BCS recruitment system.	Scale	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
	Frequency	23	29	111	178	39	380
	Percentage (%)	6.1	7.6	29.2	46.8	10.3	100.0

The recruitment process is free from undue political influence.	Scale	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
	Frequency	112	136	47	75	10	380
	Percentage (%)	29.5	35.8	12.4	19.7	2.6	100.0
The recruitment process reflects candidate performance.	Scale	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
	Frequency	37	112	100	114	17	380
	Percentage (%)	9.7	29.5	26.3	30.0	4.5	100.0
Overall, the BCS recruitment process is effective in selecting suitable candidates for public administration roles.	Scale	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
	Frequency	29	77	128	124	22	380
	Percentage (%)	7.6	20.3	33.7	32.6	5.8	100.0

178 (46.8%) agreed, and 39 (10.3%) strongly agreed, totalling 57.1% optimism. On the other hand, 29 (7.6%) disagreed, 23 (6.1%) strongly disagreed, and 111 (29.2%) were neutral.

When asked about resistance to reform, one key informant said,

"Many bureaucrats are afraid of changes in recruitment. They perceive it as a threat because they are concerned that a system based more on merit and competition will attract candidates who are more qualified than they are." (KII No 02)

112 (29.5%) strongly disagreed, and 136 (35.8%) disagreed. This means that 65.3% of respondents think political influence is there. Only 75 respondents (19.7%) agreed, 10 (2.6%) strongly agreed, and 47 (12.4%) were neutral.

One of our KII respondents said that-

"The change in political parties does not make any big changes to the system; it stays the same. There is still political pressure in the hiring process. For the past 16 years, Tofayel Batch has been the most important person in the civil service." (KII No 01)

Analysis using the Pearson Chi-Square

Perceptions of Fairness							
Significance (p-value)							
Significance of the impact of demographic factors	Age	Gender	Education Level	University Type	Field of Study	Region of Residence	BCS Aspirant
The quota system in recruitment does not undermine merit-based selection.	0.369	0.391	0.569	0.008	0.331	0.420	0.268

Viva voce interviews are free from personal bias.	0.220	0.629	0.511	0.054	0.498	0.501	0.804
Do you think there is a mismatch between what BCS tests and what the public service requires?	0.033	0.371	0.223	0.105	0.002	0.105	0.764
The BCS recruitment system ensures a merit-based selection process.	0.087	0.003	0.076	0.238	0.67	0.266	0.074

Several types of universities had quite different ideas about whether the quota system affects merit-based selection (p = .008). Respondents' opinions on whether BCS tests align with public service needs revealed significant differences based on age (p = 0.033) and field of study (p = 0.002). There were statistically significant differences between genders (p = .003). During the conversation, one person said,

" The hiring process should not be influenced by anything outside of it so that all candidates are judged only on their skills." (Respondent- 16)

Perceptions of Transparency							
Significance (p-value)							
Transparency	Age	Gender	Education Level	University Type	Field of Study	Region of Residence	BCS Aspirant
Should the marks of the preliminary, written, and viva stages be publicly disclosed for each candidate?	0.000	0.001	0.043	0.003	0.114	0.017	0.095
There are minimal reported incidents of exam malpractice (e.g., leaks, cheating).	0.089	0.192	0.024	0.004	0.519	0.195	0.274
Complaint or appeal mechanisms are in place	0.448	0.036	0.450	0.000	0.417	0.004	0.300

and functional.						
Results are published transparently and promptly.	0.086	0.283	0.028	0.000	0.248	0.916	0.774

This item had the most significant demographic impact, as it was influenced by age (p = 0.000), gender (p = 0.001), education level (p = 0.043), university type (p = 0.003), and region (p = 0.017). Perceptions of how well complaint mechanisms work varied by gender (p = 0.036), education (p = 0.000), and region (p = 0.004).

Perceptions of Trust							
Significance (p-value)							
Trust	Age	Gender	Education Level	University Type	Field of Study	Region of Residence	BCS Aspirant
I am confident that future reforms will improve the integrity of the BCS recruitment system.	0.594	0.512	0.368	0.132	0.033	0.058	0.606
The recruitment process is free from undue political influence.	0.036	0.964	0.032	0.000	0.446	0.019	0.061
The recruitment process reflects candidate performance.	0.168	0.777	0.68	0.170	0.788	0.136	0.830
Overall, the BCS recruitment process is effective in	0.187	0.140	0.060	0.068	0.085	0.803	0.357

selecting suitable candidates for public administration roles.							

Age (p = 0.036), education (p = 0.032), region (p = 0.019), and university type (p < 0.0001) all had a statistically significant relationship with freedom from political influence.

There was an enormous difference in how confident people were in future reforms based on the type of university (p = .033) and the field of study (p = .058).

One of the most interesting things is that everyone wants transparency, especially when it comes to publishing test scores. This demand transcended demographic lines, indicating that people were dissatisfied with the unclear evaluation criteria across the board. Many people believe that the system selects qualified candidates. Still, the notion that excessive political influence compromises the integrity of the hiring process remains strong, particularly among educated and diverse groups.

One of the people we talked to for the interview said this:
"A neutral third party should monitor and evaluate all viva boards to ensure that no one is playing favourites or engaging in unfair practices. Independent audits could help restore public trust in the system." (Respondent- 08)

As an expert participant pointed out—
"The process of choosing Viva board members is done in such a way that even the members themselves do not know which board they will be on, which makes sure that everyone is treated fairly." (KII No 04)

DISCUSSION

This study examines students' perceptions of the effectiveness of the Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) recruitment, focusing on three key aspects: fairness, openness, and trust.

Students' opinions on the quota system, viva voce, and the written exam's ability to evaluate candidates were used to investigate how fair they thought the system was. Most of the respondents who answered (63.7%) believed that the quota system did not affect merit-based selection. However, there were several problems with the viva voce stage, and more than 52% of respondents reported being unsure whether it was fair. This result aligns with previous research, which has shown that the viva stage is often influenced by personal bias and political factors, making recruitment less fair (Zhang & Bhattacharjee, 2023). The quota system, which 63.7% of respondents supported, continues to spark debates about fairness versus merit. Several experts and respondents (KII1) called for changes that would place more emphasis on skills-based assessments rather than just the quota system. This method aligns with the global practice of filling civil service jobs based on merit, where recruiting based on merit is considered essential to ensure that the best candidates are selected (Zaman, 2015). Ahmad's (2013) research has shown that political biases in the quota system hinder the establishment of a true meritocracy, which in turn makes the civil service less efficient. Another important finding was that 30.5% of respondents were unsure whether the written exam accurately measures the skills required for public service. In Bangladesh, this is a common concern because the recruitment process remains based on traditional public administration models, despite the global shift toward new public management (Bischof, 2021). Many people criticised the BCS exams for being too focused on memorisation and

suggested that they should use more analytical and problem-solving methods (KII4). This finding aligns with other research on civil service reform, which suggests that recruitment systems should prioritise competency-based evaluations over rote memorisation (Skorková, 2016).

A large majority of respondents (74.2%) agreed with the idea of making grades public to increase accountability and reduce uncertainty about how candidates are judged. This finding aligns with Ahmad's (2013) research, which suggests that public transparency in recruitment is a crucial aspect of ensuring the process is fair and open to all in Bangladesh's civil service.

To alleviate the confusion that often leads candidates to distrust the process (KII2), participants suggested that the BCS should publish marking rubrics for the viva, written, and preliminary exams. This aligns with findings from other studies worldwide on recruitment reform, which emphasise the importance of having clear criteria and metrics that can inform candidate evaluations (Chalkia & Reklitis, 2017). Additionally, the concept of creating a centralised online platform to track candidates' progress in real-time was proposed as a modern solution to address the current system's lack of transparency.

According to the survey results, 65.3% of respondents felt that political bias still affected the recruitment process. Many of them linked the viva voce to political favouritism (KII1). Previous research has demonstrated that this perception of political interference has been a persistent issue in Bangladesh's civil service for a considerable time and remains a significant obstacle to establishing trust in the recruitment process. Additionally, while most respondents (57.1%) expressed hope for future reforms, a considerable number expressed concern about corruption and nepotism within the system (KII5). Respondents noted that these problems make them less confident that the recruitment system can find the best people for civil service jobs (KII3). This aligns with what people around the world have observed about the importance of ensuring that public sector recruitment systems are accountable and have independent oversight. The study of demographic factors revealed that education level (p = 0.032) and region of residence (p = 0.019) had a significant impact on how people perceived political power. People with more education and those who live in cities were more worried about the politicisation of the recruitment process. People who live in rural areas, on the other hand, seem to care less about this issue. This result suggests that candidates' perceptions of the fairness and trustworthiness of the BCS recruitment system are influenced by their geographical location and educational background. The study's results have significant implications for modifying the BCS recruitment system. First, there is considerable support for transitioning to a more merit-based recruitment process, where skills-based tests are given greater importance over the quota system and memorisation. It is essential to use aptitude tests and domain-specific evaluations to make the process fairer (KII4). The demand for clear marking and the use of digital platforms also showed that the recruitment system needs to be updated to align with international best practices in public sector recruitment. To ensure fairness, all candidates should be judged based on their skills and qualifications, regardless of background or political views.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the proposed changes aim to make the recruitment process more effective, but also to restore people's faith and trust in the BCS system:

- The BCS recruitment process should move toward a competency-based model that focuses on testing candidates' analytical skills, ethical reasoning, and ICT skills.

- The current BCS syllabus should be changed to better-fit candidates with different academic backgrounds.
- There should be a standardised aptitude test, like the Indian Civil Service Aptitude Test (CSAT), to see how well candidates can think critically, solve problems, and understand other cultures.
- The system should move toward questions that are based on real-life situations and test candidates' ability to use what they know.
- The viva board should not be biased by politics or personal interests to make sure the process is fair and unbiased.
- For the sake of honesty, marks from all stages—Preliminary, Written, and Viva—should be made public. This would ensure that candidates understand how they were evaluated at each step.
- There should be a limit on the number of tries a candidate can make.
- This partnership will make sure that there is a consistent way to recruit, train, and develop civil servants.
- There should be less focus on the prestige of these elite services and more emphasis on getting a wider range of people interested in civil service jobs.
- The BCS recruitment process must follow a set schedule that is always on time.

CONCLUSION

This study focuses on exploring the effectiveness of university students' perceptions of the Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) recruitment system, specifically in terms of the dimensions of Fairness, Transparency, and Trust. There is something important about their insight as future candidates, a perspective that is different from the theoretical and aspirational yet connects them.

The results show a complex evaluative landscape. While the meritocratic foundations of the BCS examination process are broadly acknowledged, students expressed significant reservations about how these principles are realised in practice. Respondents argued that this approach fails to assess the analytical, problem-solving, and leadership skills essential for effective public administration. This critique aligns with earlier studies (Jahan, 2006; Hasan et al., 2022), which have highlighted the disconnect between the competencies tested in the BCS system and the skills demanded by contemporary governance challenges.

Many respondents believed that the oral interview process was subjective and susceptible to implicit biases and/or political influences. Although some key informants were able to justify the integrity of the viva voce by reference to procedural safeguards, the student data indicated widespread skepticism. The lack of a clear evaluation standard and a transparent scoring system was identified as an important element that eroded trust. Unstructured interviews can be criticized for their susceptibility to bias and poor predictive validity (Campion et al. 2011).

In a general sense, transparency was seen as one of the key factors affecting recruitment effectiveness. A strong majority of respondents were in favor of public disclosure of scores at all stages of the examination, as such disclosure would improve accountability and lessen perceptions of favoritism or malpractice. There was also a failure to have an effective mechanism for complaints and appeals, which was identified as a structural weakness. Lack of remedial mechanisms, if not present, may lead the candidate to feel that the system is not responsive, which is counterproductive to institutional legitimacy. While the aim of this revised approach to admissions was understood in terms of its inclusivity and representational benefits, many respondents felt that its current application at times

undermines merit-based selection. This attitude is part of a broader policy discussion in Bangladesh, where the trade-off between affirmative action and meritocracy has been debated in both political and academic spaces (Babu, 2022).

A shift to a competency-based recruitment (CBR) model, adopted in several advanced civil service systems, would ensure that selection processes assess not only academic knowledge, but also behavioral and technical competencies related to public service performance. Second, the incorporation of structured aptitude testing, situational judgment tests, and digital test tools may broaden the evaluation methods and improve predictive validity. Third, accountability would be enhanced by institutionalizing transparency through the systematic publication of results, the use of clear rubrics for scoring interviews, and grievance mechanisms that are easily accessible. Finally, modifying the quota policy to ensure a balance between inclusiveness and merit-based selection can alleviate concerns about unfair advantage and restore the trust of the best candidates.

In a broader sense, the study contributes to the literature on public sector reform by highlighting the perspectives of an often-overlooked stakeholder group — students who represent the incoming generation of public servants. Their views illustrate that the sustainability, credibility, and performance capacity of the BCS will depend on its ability to evolve in line with contemporary expectations of fairness, transparency, and trust. Reforming the recruitment process is not just an administrative change; it's an investment in the future of governance in Bangladesh. By creating transparent, competency-driven systems that embed meritocratic values, the BCS can both draw the most qualified candidates and foster a culture of integrity and excellence in performance that will serve the nation for years to come.

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