Health promotion at the university level in Bangladesh: a case from EWU

Abstract

Health promotion, as defined by the World Health Organization, is a comprehensive approach that enables individuals and communities to improve health by addressing both personal behaviors and broader social and environmental factors. Since the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion (1986), it has focused on key actions such as building healthy policies, creating supportive environments, strengthening community engagement, developing personal skills, and reorienting health services. Young people aged 10–24 years, especially university students, are a key target group because this stage of life strongly influences lifelong habits. However, global evidence shows that many students experience unhealthy lifestyles, including poor diet, low physical activity, and rising mental health issues. Despite their high potential, universities often face challenges in implementing effective and sustainable health promotion strategies.

The Health Promoting University (HPU) concept, developed in the 1990s, seeks to integrate health into all aspects of university life—policy, teaching, research, and community engagement. Frameworks such as the Okanagan Charter emphasize a whole-system, participatory approach with interdisciplinary collaboration. HPUs focus on key areas including mental health, physical activity, nutrition, and prevention of substance abuse. Successful examples, such as Indonesia's "healthy campus" initiative, highlight how combining education, prevention, and supportive environments can improve overall well-being.

In Bangladesh, the need for such initiatives is critical. With 171 universities and over one million students, many institutions lack sufficient health-promoting infrastructure, services, and curricula. Common issues include overcrowding, limited access to healthy food, poor hygiene, and inadequate recreational and counseling facilities. Health promotion is also largely absent from academic programs and research. Consequently, students face growing physical, mental, and behavioral health challenges, while institutional responses remain limited.

Nevertheless, universities provide a strategic platform to influence long-term health behaviors and societal outcomes. Institutions like East West University can play a transformative role by introducing mandatory health education, encouraging healthier lifestyles, improving academic performance, and reducing absenteeism. Such initiatives can also serve as models for other universities.

This study aims to identify enabling factors and barriers to health promotion at East West University and develop evidence-based strategies to establish it as a Health Promoting University. It also seeks to design a health promotion curriculum and a general framework applicable to similar settings, contributing to achieving Sustainable Development Goals, SDG3 - Good health and well-being, SDG4 – Quality education, and SDG11 – Sustainable cities and communities.

A mixed-type design will be used, combining a quantitative cross-sectional survey (n=404) with qualitative interviews involving students, faculty, and staff. Quantitative data through questionnaires will be collected only from randomly selected students. However, qualitative data will be collected through interviews, and observation checklists for selected students, faculties,

and staff. All the data collection tools (namely questionnaire, interview guidelines, and observation checklists) will be finalized after pilot testing and considering ethical concerns. Quantitative analysis will be conducted in SPSS, including descriptive and inferential techniques, while qualitative data will be analyzed thematically using NVivo, following standards such as STROBE (STrengthening the Reporting of OBservational studies in Epidemiology) and COREQ (Consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ): a 32-item checklist for interviews and focus groups).

Overall, the study aims to generate practical, evidence-based insights to strengthen university health promotion and improve student well-being sustainably.