Educated but unskilled

The shortfalls of formal education in a narrowing job market

RUBAB NAYEEM KHAN

"*LEKHA pora kore je, gari ghora chore shei!*"—an idiom very familiar to Bengalis that promises "cars and horses", in other words, wealth, provided we studied sincerely.

As a fresh post-grad student, I'm toiling two days a week after work hours, sitting through three-hour night classes and breaking my neck over many assignments. And I'm yet to earn a *"gari"* (car) or a *"ghora"* (horse).

Despite working for seven years, it seems like skills in MS-Office or other apps fall short of being relevant when applying for jobs. Employers now put your logic and experience to test, to see how you tackle real-world problems they never wrote about in exam guidebooks.

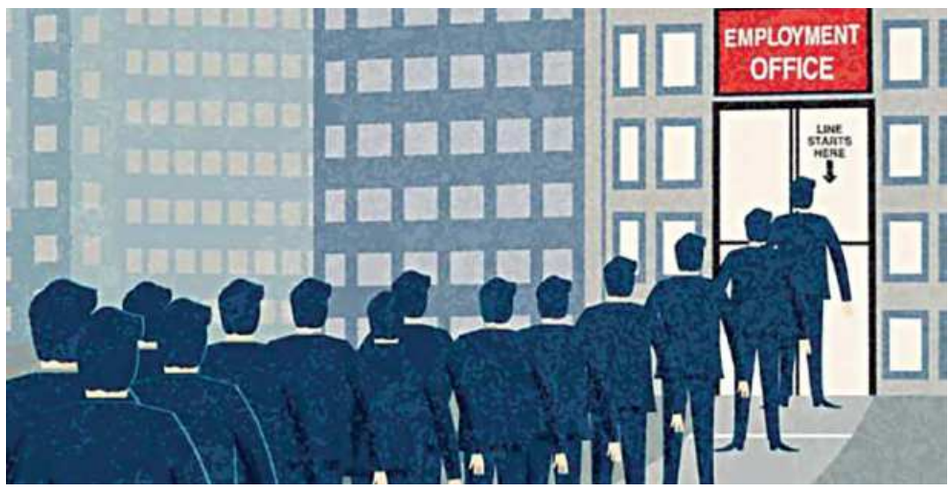
Someone in an interview board once inquired, "If a colleague asks you for a confidential file under your reporting supervisor, what will you do?" Using my communications academic background, and my ad-hoc learned logic from past job experiences, I answered, hoping it was the best answer. Clearly it didn't work out the way I thought it would. After almost a decade, the realisation dawns: the textbooks from our years of formal education never mentioned the skills needed to succeed in the job market.

Add to that, the unrealistic "skill" expectations from employers that causes graduates to suffer from cognitive dissonance regarding their formal years of learning. Unemployment, occurs in the absence of right skills rather than scarcity of jobs. In 2019, a World Bank report found: one in three students remain unemployed right after graduation and only 19 percent of college graduates are being employed in full-time or part-time jobs; while the rest are unemployed ("One in Three Students Unemployed", *The Daily Star*).

With a majority of the youth sitting jobless, it's baffling to see that we're still clinging to the idea that, good grades ensure good jobs. Especially when the stats on unemployment suggests otherwise. Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) shows that more than 46 percent of graduates remain unemployed; additionally, graduate tracking surveys from last year states that 30 percent of college graduates and 20 percent of university graduates have remained unemployed for over a year.

The impact of the asymmetry between knowledge read and knowledge learned in practice is most apparent when considering the bleak employment scenario for Bangladeshi youth, at a time where there are 2 million people entering the labour force every year as the World Bank says.

The reform of teaching practices (or the lack of it) in educational institutes is a tale as old as time. A major dent in our education system is the dependence on rote-learning. Addressing the issue, a 2015 report in this newspaper said that "as per a 2012 baseline survey on class-III students conducted under the Third Primary Education Development Programme, only 20 percent of students had the competence level of class-III, 30 percent had the level of class-I, and 50 percent had the level of class-II", stating further that teacher's insincerity is what contributes to the gap in learning.



We have received theoretical knowledge under local boards (SSC, HSC, Dakhil) or foreign boards such as Edexcel, Cambridge. Nurturing skills however was not an area explored by our alma mater. This dire need for trained teachers is reflected in their methods of teaching along with their proficiency in English. At the moment, 55 percent of English and mathematics teachers in secondary schools aren't equipped with any proper training in their respective subjects, says the Education Watch Report from 2018-2019. Looking back at my own schooling experience, I too can corroborate that many subject teachers didn't have a strong command over English, although they were following an English medium curriculum.

But despite knowing well there's a dearth of career-centric education in Bangladesh, employers expect candidates to think on their feet. So, imagine how puzzling it is, when students, regardless of which medium they were instructed in, applying for jobs get rejected without any scope for feedback which would include their lack of fluency in English and other job-related practical skills.

The problem isn't the inability to learn a foreign language, rather handling the rejection that comes with it. Rejection sans constructive criticism only makes a job seeker feel incompetent; and professional inadequacy at any level, is a big baggage to carry. So where to from here? There's academic merit, but spoken English isn't good enough, there's experience but the skills aren't befitting. You're now riddled with enough anxiety to make you second guess your abilities.

With the rising uncertainties, eager graduates are exposed to, inconsistencies of the advertised skills required in the job market. And I'm no stranger to this myself! In an attempt to transition my career in communications, I had accepted a job offer from an organisation, only to realise it was more content writing and less communications; and from there began the monotony of serial underemployment.

Many like myself, dive into the rat-race of earning big money—only to wind up in a workplace with strict hours and decent salary—but with work that gives no scope for learning, thus, killing whatever is left of one's creative skills or productivity. With the job market being a tight squeeze, many professionals surrender to underemployment for the sake of survival; and the 1.38 crore underemployed masses can vouch for this ("1.38 cr people underemployed", *The Daily Star,* 2019)!

Hence, it's imperative that educational institutes teach these skills to the youth prior to graduation, and make them better armed with employer-approved skills and knowledge before entering the job market. Furthermore, partnerships with skills developing bodies will help rectify the misconceptions surrounding good grades and employment in Bangladesh.

A skills heavy curriculum like Bangladesh Youth Leadership Center (BYLC) has helped in tackling knowledge, skills gap and unemployment among students in English, Bengali and Madrasa schools since 2008, through a plethora of opportunities such as job placement opportunities, career guidance, mentoring, training on strategic thinking and ability to communicate, thus mitigating the divide and discrimination between students and employers.

Similarly, if higher education was more subject specific, it could enable students to be more proactive when they are prepping to get in and out of jobs. For example, a journalism student, as part of the course, could be sent to shadow print or broadcast media journalists for a simulation of what the job entails.

If employers are looking for a communications expert with tech skills in Illustrator, InDesign or Photoshop, there should be a course or workshop that focuses on teaching the basics of such software. At the end of the day, what needs to be communicated to students is that, CGPA is merely an indicator of who to employ, the skills are what ensure job security.

While private universities are arranging job fairs regularly, there's no guarantee that access to an organisation, let alone an interview will happen instantly after applying. Employability is dependent on communication skills such as speaking, listening, constructively arguing, resolving conflict, coping with failure and participating in teamwork. Such workshops and training sessions, prior to graduation, will allow students to quote these abilities in their CVs, showing tangible proof that they aren't just book-smart.

There are many students who still firmly believe that a high CGPA might be their saving grace. But rising unemployment is a clear indicator of it being otherwise. The complacency towards this learning loop goes to show that we are also part of the problem. The reform we've been discussing for ages needs to be addressed and implemented by universities. If that pans out, maybe someday, the unemployed population and individuals like me can afford the "*gari-ghora*" that education promises.

Rubab Nayeem Khan is a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*.

PROJECT SYNDICATE

Why Bernie?

ALEXANDER FRIEDMAN

FOR the last 50 years, almost every US presidential election has brought a new swing of the national political pendulum. Richard Nixon's shifty administration gave way, after Gerald Ford was in office long enough to pardon his former boss, to the choirboy Jimmy Carter. Four years later, in rode Ronald Reagan, and then, following George HW Bush's one-term interregnum, came America's first baby boomer president, Bill Clinton. An impeached (but brainy) philanderer, Clinton was succeeded by Bush's son, the moralising and anti-intellectual George W Bush, who then gave way to the Spock-like Barack Obama, before the pendulum's widening swing extended all the way to the unprecedented fringe of Donald Trump.

> *After the Nevada caucuses, US Senator Bernie Sanders has more than just wind at his back. He represents exactly the type of partisan reaction to Trump that should be expected, and he is the latest manifestation of the national political pendulum's steepening arc.*

So, is it any wonder that as the Democrats muddle through their nominating contest, their most extreme candidate is running away with the race? After the Nevada caucuses, US Senator Bernie Sanders has more than just wind at his back. He represents exactly the type of partisan reaction to Trump that should be expected, and he is the latest manifestation of the national political pendulum's steepening arc. Sanders, a lifelong socialist who has never joined the Democratic Party, embodies the opposite of America's 1980s-style, greed-is-good incumbent.

Why has the arc of the United States' electoral swings become so wide?

Once upon a time, successful presidential candidates had to embrace hope and optimism. This made sense, for the world's wealthiest country was on a more than century-long upswing, living large in its fevered American Dream. When leaders deviated from this script in periods of national difficulty (think of Carter's "malaise" speech), or were blamed for temporary recessions at odds with rising-tide expectations (Bush *père*), the electorate showed them the door.

Then, the millennium turned and the American Century was laid low by three successive existential body blows: the 9/11 terrorist attacks, misconceived and inconclusive wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the 2008 global financial crisis. For more than a decade since the crisis, policymakers have tried everything to boost economic growth, for nothing lifts more boats. And yet debate still rages about what can be done to restore 4 percent annual GDP growth. The answer is probably nothing sustainable, as extreme tax cuts have shown. Simply put, the US economy grew abnormally fast for the century after the Civil War, because human life spans almost doubled and productivity soared, owing to breakthrough discoveries that rarely come around (for example, vaccines, antibiotics, electricity, and microchips).

Voters likely see in Sanders someone who speaks convincingly to lost hopes and wants fundamentally to change a system that no longer offers them a credible path forward. PHOTO: **AFP**

By contrast, despite persistent and ever more extreme unconventional monetary policies since the financial crisis, the Congressional Budget Office expects real (inflation-adjusted) GDP growth this decade to average just 2 percent annually. This may not be secular stagnation, so much as a reversion to mean: since 1800, the US economy has grown at roughly the pace the CBO now projects. And critically, the last decade of ultra-loose monetary policy widened wealth inequality so much that many in the middle class fell into the resulting chasm, taking flagging faith in the American Dream with them.

And with that faith probably went any hope for a moderate Democrat to win the 2020 nomination. After all, Democrats like Joe Biden, Pete Buttigieg, and Amy Klobuchar talk a lot (even with their inevitable shift left) like Bill Clinton and Robert Rubin, avatars of an era that seemed good at the time, but today is viewed as the period when jobs were globalised away, median incomes stagnated, and a new plutocracy was not just born, but sponsored by its national leaders.

Demographics, like gravity, are close to an immutable force. As much as the traditional "wise" men and women of the Democratic Party try to convince voters that nominating Sanders will re-elect Trump, most of the party's youth, immigrant, and minority blocs (the Democrats' literal future) appear to disagree. They likely see in Sanders someone who speaks convincingly to lost hopes and wants fundamentally to change a system that no longer offers them a credible path forward. After all, why defend a *status quo* that leaves you deep in debt, tenuously employed, badly housed, and one medical emergency away from economic ruin? Ironically, this powerful message is similar to Trump's appeal to disaffected working-class voters to win the Republican nomination and the presidency in 2016.

Elections are uncertain, and for all the self-serving rhetoric of the Democratic establishment (and of Michael Bloomberg's USD 460 million, and counting, in advertising) that nominating Sanders would ensure Trump's re-election, there is likely a close to even chance that this consensus thinking is wrong. Sanders could win a presidential election for any number of reasons. The country is almost perfectly divided regardless of candidate, swing voters are unpredictable, electoral math is tricky, Trump has plenty of weaknesses, and a lot can happen between now and November.

Let's not forget that most political and market forecasters got the 2016 election wrong. Today, as America's national ethos of optimism seemingly gives way to bipartisan disillusionment, Sanders' momentum is both understandable and not to be underestimated.

Alexander Friedman, a co-founder of Jackson Hole Economics, is a former Chief Executive Officer of GAM Investments, Chief Investment Officer of UBS, Chief Financial Officer of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and White House Fellow.
Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2020.
www.project-syndicate.org
(Exclusive to *The Daily Star*)

QUOTABLE *Quote*

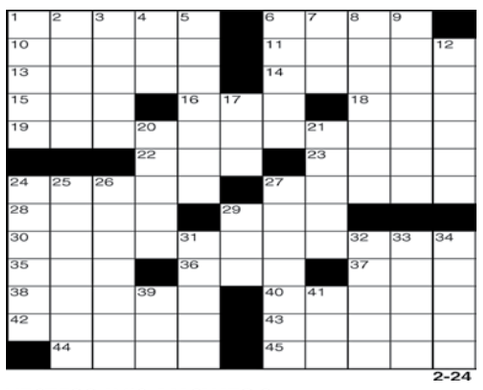
CHINUA ACHEBE
(1930-2013)
Nigerian novelist, poet and professor

The only thing we have learnt from experience is that we learn nothing from experience.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Media mogul Winfrey
6 Herring's kin
10 Italian "You're welcome"
11 Macaroni shapes
13 Folded meals
14 Ouzo flavor
15 Wedding words
16 Black goo
18 Sgt.'s superior
19 Autos' build to show new designs
22 Bullfight cry
23 Not recorded
24 Inclines
27 Swiss cheese features
28 Old Atlanta arena
29 Poker prize
30 Recital setting
35 Had lunch
36 Stick up
37 Even score
38 Soda bottle size
40 Conjure up
42 – voce
43 Casual eatery
44 Close
45 Garden starters

DOWN
1 Eye-related
2 Madrid museum
3 Scout's job
4 In the past
5 Backpackers' stopovers
6 Begin
7 Attila, for one
8 John Adams' wife
9 Merit
12 Hearing and smell, for two
17 Gorilla, for example
20 Like a dunce cap
21 Dress material
24 Village residents
25 State of mind
26 Bening of "Bugsy"
27 Activity centers
29 Old hand
31 Mistake
32 Make amends
33 Was fond of
34 Lusty looks
39 Seventh Greek letter
41 Compete



2-24

YESTERDAY'S **ANSWERS**

	T	E	T	E		L	I	N	K	
C	O	R	E	S		A	R	O	A	R
A	P	O	R	T		T	E	R	R	A
B	E	D	M	A	T	E		W	A	G
I	K	E		T	A	X	R	A	T	E
T	A	S	S	E	L		E	Y	E	S
			A	S	K	I	N			
D	R	E	I		S	C	O	W	L	S
R	A	N	L	A	T	E		E	A	U
E	G	G		H	O	T	D	A	T	E
A	L	I	V	E		R	A	P	I	D
M	A	N	I	A		A	L	O	N	E
	N	E	E	D		Y	E	N	S	

WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO **dsopinion@gmail.com.**

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott