

THE 9 TO 5 CONUNDRUM

The Star looks at how to fix the skills gap

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PHOTOS: PRABIR DAS

Confucius says, "Choose a job you love, and you will never have to work." I am sure most of today's jobs didn't exist then. Neither was it so difficult to find one.

Despite the ever-rising cost of getting a degree, one fact stands out today like a student shouting in a quiet campus library: out of more than half a million Bangladeshi graduates each year, an alarmingly high number of them can't find a job. According to a 2014 report prepared by the Economist Intelligence Unit, nearly 5 out of every 10 Bangladeshi graduates are unemployed (against 3 out of 10 in India and Pakistan).

And those who finally manage to find a job—the positions are often part-time, low-wage or not related to their career interests—they are underemployed. "The problem has two sides—the demand side and the supply side," Dr Fahmida Akter Khatun, Research Director of CPD says. "Companies that still want to recruit are often not getting the talents they are looking for. On the

other hand, some graduates are not finding enough companies that can hire them." The Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) is an apex think tank that conducts research on issues of critical national and regional interests.

Underemployment is indeed an issue that concerns many graduates. "In a company like GP, both engineers and business graduates can realise their full potential," says Quazi Mohammad Shahed, Chief Human Resource Officer of Grameenphone which is the largest mobile phone operator in the country with more than 50 million subscribers. "But the entire country is not like that. I graduated from BUET with a degree in mechanical engineering. There are few companies where we can use our knowledge and skills. Industrialisation has not flourished in our country."

Exacerbating the problem of unemployment and underemployment is the fact that in a changing global economy both job description and job specification keep changing.

The question is do most universities adequately prepare today's graduates for the competitive and dynamic work environment?

"The style of imparting learning has to change," Mohammad Shahed says. "Students have to be pushed to learn through practical experience. They must go out and learn from companies. We have a strong internship programme where graduates can get invaluable industry knowledge. Field research is a must. And while conducting research, students must preserve integrity."

Lately Bangladeshi

universities have been known less for their quality of education and more for other things—often not nice. Almost none of the public and private universities appear in global rankings. Instead, most of these universities are frequently in the news for student violence and poor governance. Dr Fahmida Akter says, "We have so many private universities. But unfortunately more than 90 percent of the graduates of these universities are unemployable."

A lot of leading employers share this view while educators may see university graduates' preparedness more favourably. "Educa-

