

Quota reform alone can't solve youth unemployment

The government should focus on quality education underpinned by a strong science and technology base to produce a modern youthful workforce

AHMED ABDULLAH AZAD

NOW that the dust has temporarily settled from the recent agitation for reform of the quota system in government jobs, it is time to calmly reflect on the next steps needed to establish a system that is fair and equitable and makes best use of the potential in our youth. There are economically and socially deprived sections of society that still need special support through government intervention such as the quota system.

The agitating students had asked for a review of the quota system, and the government announced its abolishment. Fortunately, the baby wasn't thrown out with the bathwater as the door was left ajar for making special provisions for disadvantaged sections of society. Total abolition of quota for needy freedom fighters is not justified, but other ways must be found to reward freedom fighters and their descendants, and also support other economically disadvantaged people.

There are compelling reasons to look beyond the quota system for youth employment in Bangladesh as the much-coveted government positions are very small in number. Bangladesh's biggest asset could be the youthful workforce who constitute about 70 percent of the population. Unfortunately, the number of unemployed youth stands at about 45 million of which a very negligible fraction will ever find higher level employment in the government services because an overwhelming majority, including children of freedom fighters, don't have the opportunity to acquire the desired education needed to pass the qualifying exams. The situation is worse in areas outside the big urban regions and the abolition or reform of the quota system is not very important to most young people who need jobs. Some could be helped by opening up the unfilled 40,000 lower rung government jobs. However, such positions that are a carryover from colonial times should be phased out and replaced by high-skill jobs.

Bangladesh has one of the largest tertiary education enrolments in the developing world, but it is alarming that almost a third (about 2.5 million) of college and university leavers are reported to be unemployed. Of the approximately 5,000 applicants who

qualify in the written and viva exams for the government cadre positions, only about 2,000 end up getting one. So merely abolishing or modifying the quota will have little bearing on those who do not succeed. Massive unemployment of educated youth is waste of valuable human resources, and the primary concern of the government should be to make quality education and skill development readily available to young people from all strata of society. Hopefully, the progressive students will include this as one of their future demands.

About one million tertiary students graduate every year in Bangladesh and with the high unemployment among the educated youth, it is difficult to

planing has been carried out by the education ministry, UGC, ministry of science and technology, and the planning ministry to determine our actual needs, for manpower and technology, in the tertiary sector?

Bangladesh has shown remarkable economic growth of over 6-7 percent over a sustained period and the governments can rightly claim credit for their stewardship, but let us not forget the farmers, garment workers and expatriate labourers whose sweat and poorly remunerated labour has made this possible. The growth would have been much bigger if rampant corruption had been controlled and good governance been in place. Mega projects can contribute a bit more, but the biggest sustainable growth will come from utilising the combined intellectual potential of our huge youthful workforce. Their innate intellectual capability is undisputed, and intellectual capital can be our most potent weapon for achieving economic growth of well over 10 percent required for sustainable development necessary for promotion to a developing nation in 2024, and even more so for progressing towards a developed economy by 2041. But this will need to be complemented and supported by excellence in higher education underpinned by a very strong science and technology base. But how well prepared are we for this educational and technological transformation?

Quality higher education can only be built on a strong base of primary and secondary education. But for now, let us concentrate on youth about to enter the workforce. There is no doubt that our current and future generations of workers must be technologically proficient. The government should carry out a study to determine the number of different professionals we need in different employment sectors and set need-based post-secondary goals accordingly. To cater to the expected increase in manufacturing and skills-based jobs, many more post-secondary technical and vocational institutions need to be set up to produce a trained workforce of various categories of technical and supervisory positions. Technically trained youth can also start their own businesses and take up skilled jobs inside and outside the country. They should be well remunerated and accorded due social status so that they

don't feel pressurised to seek unnecessary university degrees.

Higher education institutions in Bangladesh should aim to produce large numbers of very good teachers for every level of education, and adequate numbers of health, agriculture and technology professionals and other technology-based professionals for various manufacturing sectors. To meet increasing demands for a technologically proficient workforce, the number of such training institutions for professionals could be expanded as required, if necessary by modifying the curricula of general universities. Bangladesh expects to be officially admitted as a developing country in 2027 and hopes to become a developed nation in 2041. Preparations for that must start right now to develop and use our own intellectual and technological capabilities to ensure that the development agenda is no longer externally driven. A new and additional type of workforce will be required for that.

No developing country can transition to a developed economy without internationally competitive postgraduate research, and transfer of the resulting technology to industry for product development, wealth generation and job creation. The less than satisfactory international ranking of our major universities, and the almost near absence of any national R&D footprint, are a reflection of where we really stand. This is not necessarily because our standards have fallen, but because other countries have spent much more and progressed much faster in research and innovation. The government will need to seriously make the necessary investments in education and research, build the required science and technology platform, and prepare and retain the highly trained workforce needed for elevation first to the status of a developing nation and then to a developed country. Intellectual capital and the technological enabling of our youthful workforce will be our major weapons.

Call for reform of the quota system is justified, but ultimately it is the provision of satisfying and productive employment for all that really matters.

Professor Dr Ahmed Abdullah Azad is a retired academic and medical researcher. Email: aazad1945@gmail.com

Midnight eviction from women's hall

No way to treat female students

WE are appalled to learn that Dhaka University authorities handed three students of Sufia Kamal Hall over to their guardians in the early hours of April 20. Their alleged offence, spreading rumours. This action of the hall authorities is regrettable and defies sense of common decency. Could this not wait till morning? The vice chancellor of the university told reporters that it was done to "safeguard the dignity" of the hall. What it actually managed to do, instead, was, taint the university's image.

Would one be remiss to suggest that this unprecedented action was to chastise students who took part in the quota reform movement? According to media reports, many student protesters now fear reprisals from DU administration and Chhatra League which dominates the campus.

This newspaper reported that the provost of Sufia Kamal Hall was purported to have threatened the students with government and intelligence surveillance for their online activities. She even threatened to expel all of nearly 2,000 students of the dormitory, if necessary.

Is this the normal sequence of actions against such alleged offence? Was not an impartial enquiry in order to ascertain the veracity of the allegation? The entire saga is ignominious for the university that we know as the beacon of our democratic values.

Stop yaba trade

Intensify drive

IT is alarming news that a syndicate is using a new route to bring yaba pills from Teknaf to Dhaka and has already brought 10 lakh yaba pills through the route in the last month alone. This information was revealed by the two members of the syndicate whom the DMP's Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime unit (CTTC) have arrested last week.

As the regular route—Teknaf-Chittagong-Dhaka—is frequently raided by the law enforcers, it is only natural for drug peddlers to find alternative routes for carrying out their business with ease. And this is exactly what has happened. Moreover, bringing these contraband tablets through this new route—Teknaf-Kuakata-Barisal-Dhaka—has become very profitable for the drug peddlers as they have to pay less to those who bring them to the city.

According to a CTTC official, the syndicate is led by a couple in Dhaka's Mohammadpur area. We hope more necessary information about this trade can be found if this couple is arrested. As yaba trade has become a big business and is also linked to illegal arms proliferation, concerted efforts by the law enforcers are needed to contain this social menace.

In addition, we must stress on Myanmar the need to clamp down on the yaba factories, because over the past decade, a large number of yaba factories have sprung up in Myanmar along the borders from where these contraband tablets are smuggled into Bangladesh. Yaba addiction is threatening our younger generation as more and more young people are getting addicted to this dangerous drug. This can't be allowed to go on any further. We risk an entire generation if this problem is not addressed immediately.



BIRU PAKSHA PAUL

MATERN-AL uncle, or *mama*, is an affectionate character in the lives of Bengalis. A typical *mama* is expected to indulge every whim of his

nephews and nieces. And that is why we got a term in Bengali literature—*Mamar Barir Aabdar*—which refers to a big demand placed to a kind-hearted uncle only. The way the bank owners are asking the government for one undue favour after another is reminiscent of this very notion. In recent times, this has reached a ridiculous level as they are demanding that the government make a rule prohibiting any "negative" reporting against their activities. Essentially, what they are asking for is an act that will force the media either to report nothing on any of their wrongdoings or to report everything in a "positive" light. If such a whim is indulged—we hope for our economy's sake that it will not be—major financial scams will sound like a "growth-supportive act of patriotism".

The bankers' behaviour reminds us of the history of Pakistan where the 12 most influential families would have industrial laws passed in their favour by convincing the military dictators. But such a demand—or *Aabdar*—to control the media is unprecedented. The Bangladesh Association of Banks (BAB), an alliance of bank directors, submitted a nine-point proposal to the finance minister in March this year. It came in the wake of media reports that the top brass of several private banks was involved in some high-profile loan scams.

As a teacher of economics, I frequently use the word "negative" to mean an inverse relationship between the price and the quantity demanded. But after the move of the directors, I am curious to see what their definition of "negative" entails: it probably implies that the journalists

can report all the good achievements such as profit growth, return on assets, and credit expansion, but the media will be gagged once it reports on the financial scams, money laundering, wilful default, and cronyism of the private bank directors. Although any sensible administration would trash this type of unethical demand instantly, we won't be surprised if the finance ministry agrees to comply with it.

Since early 2016, Bangladesh has entered a new era of central banking that paved the way for a miserable loss of banking governance and an ever-growing amount of default loans.

bank and has nothing to do with the economic cycle.

But the story will remain incomplete if we don't recall what else has happened since then. The finance ministry eclipsed the central bank, appointing a governor who would be too obedient to say "no" to anything the ministry deems right even from a political consideration. The finance minister's priorities put the main task of the ministry—i.e. to address fiscal incapacity—in the back seat. The banking sector turned from bad to worse not only in terms of default loans, but more importantly, other gains in macroeconomic stability also began to

industry.

Now if some of the bank directors happen to be among those professional defaulters, how does BAB expect the media to handle the case? One way is not to report anything about it. Will that reflect any work ethic for the media which is responsible for letting the innocent depositors know what is happening inside the banks where they have put their money? So, the media has to report it anyway for the greater national interest. My humble suggestion would be that BAB arrange a national workshop to train journalists on how to convert "negative reporting" into a positive one! BAB needs to create new jargon so "negative profit" can be termed as "optimistic profit." Also, if Director X has defaulted a loan of Tk 1,000 crore, the media should add a positive note by saying: Director X has done a great job by not paying back Tk 1,000 crore to the bank because he needs the money to support his staff, thus serving the greater interest of the nation. (Tk 1,000 crore is a little amount in comparison to our huge GDP of Tk 2,000,000 crore.)

Now, say, Director Y has laundered Tk 2,000 crore. The media should report it as: Director Y has successfully "remitted" Tk 2,000 crore in different developed countries to increase Bangladesh's stakes internationally and also to help the nation understand the process of globalisation. In the event of the increasing number of directors from one family in a bank, the media should report: Directors are caring for the bank as if it's their own baby and thus increasing family participation to ensure greater security of the institution and welfare of the nation. If BAB can make such guidelines and submit them to the government, the finance ministry is most likely to make it into law, entitled, "The Negative Reporting Prohibition Act 2018." The central bank will welcome this as a new circular and follow it blindly!

Biru Paksha Paul is an associate professor of economics at the State University of New York at Cortland. Email: birupakshapaul@gmail.com



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

Classified loans came down to as low as six percent in 2011, but they suddenly reached 10 percent during the tumultuous year of 2012. The then Bangladesh Bank Governor Dr Atiur Rahman was able to bring them down to 8.79 percent in 2015. Following his resignation, however, classified loans began to rise again since early 2016, eventually reaching close to 11 percent in 2017—a pace totally contradictory to the economy's output growth. This is indicative of weak governance and unproductive leadership of the central

erode. Export growth fell far short of import growth, remittances began to fall, forcing current account balance plunge into deficits from surpluses. Growth in foreign reserves stunted, making the exchange rate deteriorate and thus contributing to inflation, because importable goods became more expensive domestically.

Most importantly, the central bank's inaction and the finance ministry's excessive indulgence encouraged "professional defaulters" to continue with their work, upsetting the whole

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Stop cyberbullying

Bullying is an outcome of aggressive behaviour and power imbalance among people. The psychology behind bullying is to gain a feeling of power, purpose or having control over the supposed inferiors. Victims of bullies suffer the psychological consequences all the way until middle age, with higher levels of depression.

In a country like ours, school bullying is a common case. A recent survey has revealed that 29 percent of children suffer from some form of depression or sadness because of cyber bullying. Children playing games online reported a higher rate of cyber bullying. Another recent survey showed that 78 percent of parents said their children or those they know have been threatened with physical harm while playing online games.

It is high time we took action against cyberbullying if we want to ensure safety for our children.

Pritam Deb, BUET

Curbing violence against women

Syed Saad Aleedeb in his piece "Violence against women: Whither law enforcers?", published by this paper recently, talked about how women have to endure violence and harassment on a daily basis. It's important that we raise our voice against such violence. Women have the right to live without fears or prejudices and do whatever they want. Our largely male dominated society should change how it views women, who should be made aware of their rights.

Most importantly, the authorities concerned should be made accountable. It is their lack of accountability that is to blame for the current situation.

Fawzia Chowdhury, Uttara