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# UCEP

## A second chance to education

*As Bangladesh looks to graduate to the World Bank's lower middle-income group, concerns about employment opportunities shrinking relative to the number of people entering the job market are rising. Given the circumstances, it may be necessary for our policymakers to look at innovative ways to increase job creation in order to take full advantage of our human resources, and to quicken Bangladesh's development process.*

ERESH OMAR JAMAL

According to the World Bank in 2017, the unemployment rate in Bangladesh was 11.4 percent, far greater than that of our two largest neighbouring countries, India and China, where the rates of unemployment were 3.5 percent and 4.05 percent, respectively. What was most surprising is that unemployment was actually higher among the educated youth, compared to those who were less educated.

One may misinterpret these figures and come to believe that Bangladesh lacks demand for highly skilled workers. But that is far from what the reality is. In fact, according to most top entrepreneurs, a shortage of highly skilled workers is still one of the biggest drawbacks that businesses have to deal with in our country.

What then is the explanation behind the educated youth unemployment rate being higher? One could be a lack of skills development even among the educated youth, which means that our education institutions are failing to equip young people with the tools necessary to succeed in different work environments. Second could be a divide between the skills that businesses are demanding and what individuals can offer—in other words, market inefficiency.

Besides that, there is also a huge gap in the assistance for the education of underprivileged children in our country, which indicates another failure to make full use of the human resources available to us. This is where UCEP (Underprivileged Children's Educational Programs) Bangladesh has played such a pivotal role over the years.

Established in 1972 by Lindsay Allan Cheyne, a New Zealander, with the motto "Help to Learn, Skills to Earn", UCEP Bangladesh is a non-governmental organisation which provide a "second chance to education for out-of-school children" and "decent jobs to youth through Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and skills development." With a special focus on social inclusion, UCEP also gives priority to women, children and youth from poor and underprivileged families.

According to government data, around 19 percent of children attending school in our country dropout at the primary level, while dropout among students at the secondary level is currently at 38 percent. Although UCEP focuses on those leaving school at the primary level, it also enrolls students who left school at the secondary level, which is what its "second chance to education" is all about. Besides working children, who make up 40 percent of its students, and women, who make up 53 percent, UCEP also provides skills training programmes to various excluded communities—something which is rarely focused on by other organisations.

At present there are 10 UCEP Technical

Schools (which are Registered Training Organisation and Recognition of Prior Learning Centres) in Bangladesh alongside 16 Outreach Centres (including two Government Centres) and Community Learning Centres. UCEP also has 32 General Schools located all across the country providing education in accordance with our national curriculum, only at an accelerated speed.

According to its Acting Principle, Habibur Rahman, if we take India as an example, "the policy for education introduced by Jawaharlal Nehru shortly after independence eventually paid off" and India has now become a major power on the world stage. Unfortunately, however, we are yet to see any "similar steps being taken in our country."

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As for UCEP, it recognises, as an organisation, that only education is not enough to get people good jobs, but that individuals must also have skills and the ability to apply them—a good education must, therefore, focus on this too. To address this, UCEP offers TVET programmes that specialises on providing knowledge and skills for employment. The facilities that it has to provide such skills with are quite extensive, ranging from tools and machineries that teach students how to operate the various equipment that can be found in garments factories, to how to fix the engine of a car and any other electronic devices and more. Presently, because of what the market is demanding, it has been focusing on providing training in light engineering, construction and tourism and hospitality to its students. But it has the facility and is providing training in many other fields.

What is also beneficial is that UCEP gives students the opportunity to attend either its morning or day shift programmes. This, as UCEP's senior officials explained, is because many of its students also work during parts of the day. This added flexibility ensures that everyone can arrange their schedule in a way which allows them to acquire further skills for better jobs even if they are already working to earn a living.

According to some students who attended the day shift, the training that they were receiving gave them tremendous hope. Hope, particularly of a better future, as they were simultaneously doing low paid and difficult jobs just to make ends meet. With the practical training that they were receiving, they

professional lives—and perhaps life in general. That, to them, had been extremely beneficial.

In another classroom, young men who looked hardened by life, were learning how to fix the engine of a car. When asked about their experiences at UCEP, they laughed and joked and said that attending class was usually the best part of their day. One, in particular, explained how the lessons of "fixing" things was helping him change his perspective on life, especially given the destructive lifestyle he had lived until only very recently. And that this change in perspective had given him a new admiration for life, which he greatly appreciated.

To get a better feel for the job market and what is being demanded at any given time, UCEP

Although there are many other organisations working on skills development in our country, many of them have not been able to provide the quality of skills training that the market has demanded. While financial constraints have always been a major hurdle for any such organisations or initiatives, what has also been lacking, according to Rahman, is the correct model.

"UCEP, with its track record, has proven that it has a good working model." In fact, as Rahman explained, it is a record that is nearly unmatched, "which is proof that it has a model that works and works well." Unfortunately, because Bangladesh is about to graduate from the least developed country category, financing from abroad for UCEP and other similar organisations are now starting to dry up, making it difficult for them to function at full effectiveness.

This means that the government and the private sector need to step up and fulfil the role that was once being played by foreign NGOs and other organisations. And while this may seem like an additional burden for both, given UCEP's successful track record and the importance of human capital and a highly skilled workforce in today's highly competitive global market, investing in skills development programmes and organisations that have proven themselves to be highly capable is actually a great investment, especially in the long-run.

In that regard, Rahman believes that we have already been some very encouraging signs. The added focus on technical and vocational training, as evidenced through the budget, is an example which shows that the government now recognises the importance of what experts have been saying for a long time. However, there are still many challenges that we, as a nation, must overcome.

Keeping that in mind, the easiest way to overcoming these challenges is not for the public and private sector to only work separately, but for both to work together as well as individually. This may help offset the resource constraints that both have and could be the optimal solution moving forward.

At the end of the day, having the right skills development model leads to having more skilled workers who can get employed sooner, reducing various social costs that come along with the problem of unemployment, and UCEP has proven that over a few decades. It is time for our government to recognise that and provide greater assistance to UCEP and other innovative skills development programmes and organisations as we look to take our economy and country to the next level in the years ahead.

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believed that once they had graduated they would be able to leave these difficult times behind and gain better jobs, particularly with the aid of UCEP's job placement programme which helped thousands of students get better employment.

Another interesting point which they mentioned was the confidence they were gaining from this approach of fixing different types of machineries literally with their own hands. In one class, for example, women who were learning how to fix electronic metres used for measurement said that they had barely ever received any encouragement in their lives, which made them feel that they would never be able to make something of themselves. However, the ability to understand and fix such complicated tools which they were developing, taught them, for the first time, that they were indeed capable of succeeding in their educational and

also works closely with entrepreneurs and businesses to understand what sort of workers businesses require and the skills that are currently in demand in order to fill this gap. Not only does this help UCEP know what skills would be most useful for its students to get better jobs, but it also helps to build a bridge between businesses that are looking to hire and students who are on the lookout for work.

It is because of this, as well as other reasons, that UCEP has an extraordinarily high success rate in terms of its students getting hired quickly—95 percent of its graduates get a job within six-months of entering the job market. Also helpful in all of this is that the curriculums that UCEP offers are reviewed by a stakeholders and employers committee. Thus, businesses now trust that UCEP graduates will generally turn out to be useful assets for their organisations given the opportunity.