

The post-pandemic era demands innovation from the youth

Adapting to new technology is crucial

As the pandemic continues to rage across the country and its economic fallout is already starkly manifested, young people are facing unprecedented uncertainty. Will they get jobs with their existing skills? Will they find new employment after being laid off? Will existing young entrepreneurs be able to survive? Should aspiring entrepreneurs abandon their dreams? Most of all, will they have the right skills to survive in a post-pandemic scenario? In an effort to address these crucial issues, The Daily Star Youth Summit 2020, on the occasion of World Youth Skills Day, invited over 60 speakers to a series of webinars on July 15. And one of the key messages that came out of the summit was that young people have to adapt to the technological demands of these extraordinary times.

Innovation, of course, is the overriding theme to survival and this was reiterated by many of the industry leaders, successful young entrepreneurs and human resources experts invited to the event.

The growing digitisation of the business process demands advanced technological skills. Thus, there is a huge need for training in skills like data analysis, web design, coding, artificial intelligence, blockchain and so on. Moreover, the orientation to technology must start at an early age from school, and so schools must be equipped with the resources to provide such learning. At the university level, too, training in these skills has to be made available. No doubt this requires huge investment and commitment especially in the public educational institutions where IT learning is very limited or, as in many cases, non-existent.

At the policy level, there has to be a major push to promote and provide training in technological skills that are demanded in the job market—now and post-pandemic. While the government has already initiated programmes for such IT skills training, these have to be accelerated and made more widespread to positively affect the millions of young people in this country. Access to internet, computers and smartphones and making these tools affordable must be a priority for the government. The government, IT sector, and the private sector in general must all work together to provide the environment for young people to acquire these skills, apply them effectively, and be able to find employment with them. In the present era, the scope for self-learning is limitless but it requires access to technology.

It is true that the pandemic has led to a huge number of job losses for young people. But it has also created a demand for a workforce that is tech-savvy and innovative. And it is the young people who have the resilience to learn the skills needed to become the problem-solvers of the future.

In memory of a true pioneer and visionary

Fahim, you will be greatly missed!

We express our shock and sorrow at the untimely death and gruesome murder of Fahim Saleh—who co-founded the ride-sharing venture Pathao in Bangladesh—in his flat in New York. We would also like to call upon the American law-enforcing agencies and government to urgently bring the perpetrators of this terrible crime to justice.

It was Fahim's dream to transform the lives of his countrymen through the use of technology. And the venture capital he started had even provided seed money to a start-up attempting to revolutionise the public transport system in Bangladesh, which has the potential to benefit thousands of people. Besides starting Pathao, Fahim had also started similar ventures in other countries such as Nigeria, Colombia, Indonesia, etc., and worked his way up to become a millionaire tech entrepreneur through his innovativeness and hard work. His willingness to share his success and resources, which demonstrated his concern for others, made Fahim an inspiring leader and a rare visionary. We will surely be worse off without him.

We would like to convey our heartfelt condolences to Fahim's family. And we sincerely hope that the investigation will be carried out quickly and those behind the murder will be caught and punished.

Fahim's legacy will live on through all that he has created and the people he has helped, and we have no doubt that his example will continue to inspire young people, especially young entrepreneurs, for years to come.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Install Covid-19 testing facility at airport

In view of the directive that travellers going overseas must have a Covid-19 certificate, obtained within ninety-six hours of the date of travel, and the recently exposed scam at Regent Hospital (and possibly others) issuing false certificates, a serious question arises: who can be trusted?

For the confidence of the traveling public (especially that they won't be exploited or misled or have to travel with possibly infected persons) and to preserve and project Bangladesh's sincerity to stop the virus from going overseas, the Directorate General of Health Services ought to install a Covid-19 testing facility at the airport itself. Travellers may be advised to reach the airport earlier than the usual time to ensure that the matter is addressed with the highest professional integrity.

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Is it still possible for Bangladesh to contain Covid-19?

Lessons from Vietnam

Md Nazmul Huda and Md Kamrul Hasan

LIKE many countries across the world, Bangladesh has been hit hard by the coronavirus pandemic. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), Bangladesh is in the fourth and last stage of Covid-19 transmission, which means that the disease has become native to the population as the numbers of cases and deaths have started to grow rapidly. On the contrary, there are some countries (e.g. New Zealand, South Korea and Vietnam) that have successfully tackled its transmission. Bangladesh may not be comparable to the high-income countries like New Zealand and South Korea. However, the country can be compared to a large extent to Vietnam because both Vietnam and Bangladesh belong to the lower-middle-income status, are densely populated, and share economic and educational ties with China, where the outbreak first occurred in December 2019.

Vietnam has been recognised as a model for low-cost response to Covid-19 by the WHO. The country has reported only 372 confirmed cases and a zero death toll as of July 16, successfully containing the spread of Covid-19. The situation in Bangladesh is quite the opposite. With 1,96,323 confirmed cases and 2,496 deaths as of July 16, the country continues to struggle to combat the disease. This has raised some questions: What has Vietnam done to contain the disease successfully? Can Bangladesh control the transmission of Covid-19 by following Vietnam's example? These questions can be answered by comparing the response of Bangladesh to Covid-19 to that of Vietnam.

Effective public campaigns

It is impossible to contain an infectious disease without the active participation of the general population in the campaigns. Vietnam understood this early and launched two successful campaigns to raise awareness about the prevention of Covid-19 among the mass people. On the one hand, the resource-limited country made a catchy music video and disseminated clear, effective messages about the importance of hand washing. On the other hand, it initiated a fundraising campaign to purchase medical and protective equipment for healthcare workers. Over USD 2.1 million was raised by April 5.

Bangladesh, by contrast, delayed public campaigns and distributed coronavirus information through radio, newspapers and televisions from March 1. However, the public campaigns for Covid-19 prevention often conveyed mixed messages to the general public, which created confusion and misunderstandings. For example, many people appeared to have misunderstood the meaning of the word "quarantine". Importantly, as available evidence suggests, while the Bangladeshi government has not launched any fundraising campaign, its allocated funds for Covid-19 prevention

were also embezzled to a large extent.

Research into developing testing kits

Vietnam's remarkable success to control Covid-19 may be attributed to its innovative research, leading to developing Covid-19 testing kits early. The Vietnamese Ministry of Science and Technology held a meeting with virologists to inspire the development of diagnostic tests in late January 2020. By early February, government-funded institutions in Vietnam had developed more than four Covid-19 testing kits that were certified by the Ministry of Defence and the National Institute of Hygiene and Epidemiology. Subsequently, two private companies, namely Viet A and Thai Duong, manufactured the testing kits. Despite its limited Covid-19 cases,

contact tracing is principally centralised and done in Dhaka, and at district and sub-district levels to some extent. Such lax and slipshod ways of tracing contact contributed to the increasing trend of Covid-19.

Non-pharmaceutical equipment

Vietnam's response to Covid-19 can be characterised by its mandatory use of face masks in public places since mid-March. The country has enforced a licensing system for shipping and trading of face masks and hand sanitisers and applied hefty fines for traders who are found to be gouging prices or producing fake masks. By contrast, in Bangladesh, counterfeit masks and hand sanitisers have flooded the markets due to limited or no monitoring and

of allocated resources, certainly makes it difficult to meet the new spending needs of a pandemic like Covid-19 and it may have increased the number of deaths related to Covid-19.

A comparative analysis, thus, shows how effective public campaigns, innovative research into developing testing kits, widespread contact tracing, monitoring and regulation of non-pharmaceutical equipment, and adequate health investment, together with strong political commitment and leadership, have greatly contributed to reducing the transmission of Covid-19 and zero deaths in Vietnam—while the opposite scenario is observed in Bangladesh.

Clearly, the war against Covid-19 is not over yet in any of the countries and



People wear protective masks as they walk on the street amid concerns over the rise in coronavirus cases and deaths in Bangladesh, on June 25, 2020.

PHOTO: REUTERS/MOHAMMAD PONIR HOSSAIN

Vietnam scaled up testing capacity with sixty-three testing sites across the country to stop community transmission.

By contrast, although Bangladesh needed to have massive testing facilities, it has established only 43 diagnostic laboratories and the total testing of Covid-19 cases has shown a decreasing trend (BBC Bangla, July 10). Notably, the bureaucratic red tape thwarted the process of developing a testing kit by Gonoshasthaya Kendra.

Contact tracing

The Vietnamese government promptly conducted three levels of contact tracing for each positive case, including identifying the second, third and fourth levels of contacts of infected individuals. Also, pharmacies across Vietnam provided information about individuals buying cold and flu medicines to the government. However, in Bangladesh,

regulation of the production and sale of non-pharmaceutical equipment. This has potentially contributed to the increased transmission of Covid-19 in Bangladesh.

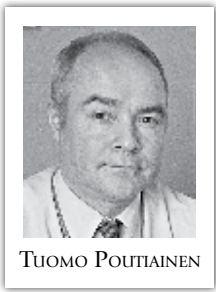
Health investment

Vietnam's response to Covid-19 can be characterised by its relatively high investment in its health care system, with public health expenditures per capita increasing at an average rate of 9.0 percent annually between 2000 and 2016. These vast investments are paid off with better treatment for Covid-19 patients with no deaths. On the other hand, the healthcare system remained neglected in the Bangladeshi government's priorities. The budget for providing the healthcare needs of the large population has remained the lowest in South Asia, with only 4.9 percent of the national budget. This suboptimal investment in health sector, together with the inefficient utilisation

may continue until effective treatment and vaccine become available globally. No doubt this has been true enough for Bangladesh because the country adopted tardy and inadequate control and containment measures to fight against Covid-19 despite being a highly vulnerable country. As such, Bangladesh can follow some of the control measures that Vietnam has undertaken to successfully tackle the disease. Although Bangladesh has delayed adopting adequate and effective control measures, it may still be possible for the country to contain Covid-19 and decrease the overall size of its outbreak. Bangladesh has a lot to learn from Vietnam in fighting against the Covid-19.

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Youth skills in the era of Covid-19 and beyond



TUOMO POUTIAINEN

THE theme of the World Youth Skills Day 2020 (observed on July 15) is "skills and resilient youth". However, this year it is the resilience of national economies and the broader TVET

(technical and vocational education and training) sector that is being tested. The Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown measures in Bangladesh have led to the closure of TVET institutions across the country, disrupting the continuity of skills development and training for millions of young people.

Bangladesh is not alone. Respondents to a survey of TVET institutions—jointly collected by the International Labour Organization (ILO), UNESCO and the World Bank—reported that owing to Covid-19, distance training has become the most common way of imparting skills for TVET centres across the globe, resulting in many difficulties with curricula adaptation, trainee and trainer preparedness, digital connectivity (one of the major barriers here), and assessment and certification processes.

This is not, surprisingly, the first time the sector has had to adapt to a health emergency and adopt new ways of teaching and training. In 1910, in the face of a national typhoid epidemic, Australia introduced its first distance TVET courses to train health inspectors by mail while they worked. Blending distance learning with practical skills development has proved effective in the TVET sector for over a century and will do so again. Necessity, as the proverb goes, is the mother of invention.

Prior to the current crisis, young people in Bangladesh were five times as likely as adults (25 years and older) to be unemployed. More than one-quarter of these young people (27 percent) were classed as "not in employment, education or training" (NEET); the rate among young women was an alarming 47 percent. Millions of young jobseekers faced tremendous challenges to make a successful transition from school to

nation's economy stabilises. It is important that the government, development partners, the private sector and civil society come together to work out an effective response plan for youth employment via a comprehensive, sector-wide approach.

Quality education and training are central to Bangladesh meeting the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Access to affordable, quality technical and vocational education and training is

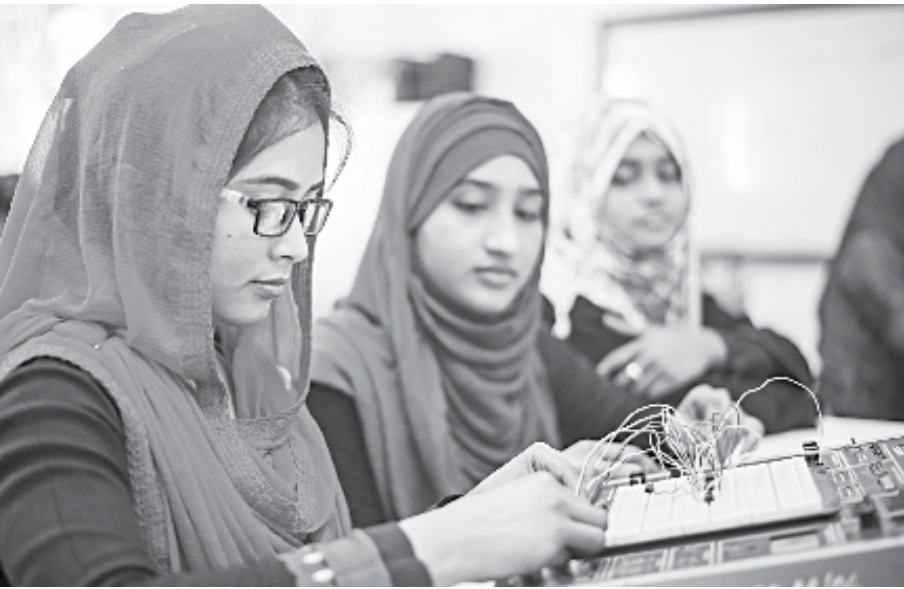
vulnerable communities. It also strongly supports transitions to green economies and environmental sustainability. TVET can improve responsiveness to changing skill demands by companies, increase productivity and increase wage levels. TVET can reduce access barriers to the world of work, for example through work-based learning and ensuring that skills gained are recognised and certified.

In the post-Covid-19 phase, young Bangladeshis will be called upon to contribute to the nation's recovery efforts. For them to fulfil their full potential, they need to be equipped with the skills to successfully manage these evolving challenges and the resilience to adapt to future disruptions. It is also a path out of poverty for them and their families. In a country like Bangladesh, one good income often feeds many.

The World Youth Skills Day 2020 is an annual opportunity for young people, TVET institutions, and public and private sector stakeholders to acknowledge and celebrate the importance of equipping young people with skills for employment, decent work and entrepreneurship.

Skilling the nation's youth in modern day, in-demand sectors and digital technologies will help pave the way for decent jobs not just in the present crisis but post-crisis too. The government response to Covid-19 and youth employment must focus on providing income support measures and in-kind cash transfers to affected young workers, particularly informal and self-employed workers, to help sustain household incomes and boost domestic demand. It is complex, it is expensive, and it will be challenging, but it is the need of the hour for millions of young Bangladeshis.

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Access to technical and vocational education and training is often the only route many young people have to employment, decent work and entrepreneurship opportunities.

COURTESY: ILO

work due to a lack of in-demand skills, experience, apprenticeship opportunities and limited career guidance.

Given the economic slowdown and the loss of jobs in both the formal and informal sectors, these TVET graduates will face considerable challenges once the

often the only route many young people have to employment, decent work and entrepreneurship opportunities.

The TVET model in Bangladesh is built on promoting equitable, inclusive and sustainable access for women, people with disabilities and minority and