

SKILLS

Will enhancing technical and vocational education solve our youth unemployment crisis?



A significant opportunity to enhance TVET quality and build stronger industry engagement lies in upgrading and expanding practical skills training.

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Imagine graduating with a degree, only to find the doors of the job market firmly closed. This is the harsh reality of youth unemployment – a global crisis affecting millions of young people. In Bangladesh, this challenge is particularly pressing, creating a generation with untapped potential.

“The curriculum was outdated, focusing more on memorisation than practical skills. Job prospects were slim, with only one person from my batch landing a relevant job,” shared Turjo Barman, a former Computer Engineering student at Daffodil Polytechnic Institute. His experience reflects the struggle many young graduates are facing these days.

Global youth unemployment figures for 2024 stood at an estimated 67.7 million individuals between the ages of 15 and 24, with emerging economies experiencing disproportionately higher rates. A report on the World Employment and Social Outlook Trends 2024 by the International Labour Organization (ILO) states that youth unemployment rates are nearly 3.5 times higher than those of adults.

A session at the World Economic Forum’s Annual Meeting of the New Champions 2024, titled “Generation Stagnation: Tackling Youth Unemployment”, highlights the disparity between those who have access to quality education and strong professional networks and those who do not. As per the report, the job market favours those from privileged backgrounds with access to quality education and strong professional networks.

Students in Bangladesh face a much more difficult reality as not

everyone has equal access to opportunities and resources. This creates a barrier for students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds who struggle to find meaningful employment. To make matters worse, many students are forced to leave their education early to work and support their families.

But could technical and vocational education and training (TVET) offer a viable solution to this crisis?

The Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (BANBEIS) 2022 Bangladesh Education Statistics report highlights the existence of 7,819 TVET institutions across Bangladesh – 691 public and 7,128 private institutions. Together, these institutions serve over 1.22 million students, but the urban-rural divide is clear. About 60.1 percent of TVET institutions are located in urban areas, and 68.7 percent of students come from cities, while rural students make up only 31.3 percent of the total enrolment. Regions like Rajshahi have the most TVET institutions, while areas like Sylhet lag behind.

Despite the availability of TVET programmes, international organisations like the European Union and World Bank, which fund skill development programmes in Bangladesh, face challenges in ensuring that these programmes meet global industry standards.

Lotte Kejser, Chief Technical Advisor of the Skills 21 project at the ILO says, “There is insufficient relevance [of the programmes] to the industry in Bangladesh and abroad. In Bangladesh, practical skills training makes up less than 10 percent of the total training hours in TVET programmes, compared to similar programmes in Northern Europe.

Most TVET programmes in Bangladesh do not include work-based training or apprenticeships.”

Lotte suggests that international organisations can better support TVET programmes in Bangladesh by familiarising the government and industry with global best practices. This would enhance the relevance of TVET programmes and encourage a greater focus on practical skills.



PHOTOS: ORCHID CHAKMA

However, students enrolled in TVET programs typically face challenges, such as needing to attain specific certification levels before securing paid employment, which limits their earning potential during training. While this is the norm, institutions like UCEP – Underprivileged Children’s Educational Programme – Bangladesh offer a distinctive model where students can both learn and earn.

“There is no alternative to technical and vocational education and training to turn the country’s vast workforce into skilled human resources,” emphasised Md Abdul Karim, Executive Director, UCEP Bangladesh.

He adds, “UCEP Bangladesh is playing a tremendous role among the NGOs in expanding technical education and transforming skilled human resources in

Bangladesh.”

Another challenge facing TVET is the underrepresentation of women. According to BANBEIS, male students significantly outnumber their female counterparts, with



only 333,409 women enrolled in technical and vocational institutes compared to 895,794 men. Deep-rooted gender stereotypes, limited access to quality education, and societal expectations discourage many girls from pursuing TVET careers. Economic pressures, such as early marriage and lack of childcare, further widen the gender gap.

Moreover, the quality of TVET education in Bangladesh depends heavily on the availability of skilled teachers. With more than 55,304 teachers across public and private TVET institutions, the need for ongoing professional development is critical.

Md Quamruzzaman, Teacher and Principal of the Manikganj Government Technical School and College said, “We must implement mandatory professional development programs focusing on emerging 4IR – Fourth Industrial Revolution – technologies and industry trends to ensure TVET teachers are

well-prepared. There is also a high need for online platforms that allow teachers to access courses on the latest technical advancements and teaching methodologies at their convenience.”



He urges, “Creating a pool of master trainers and the strengthening of industry collaborations is necessary to elevate the quality of education and better align with labour market demands.”

Given these challenges, how can TVET evolve to meet the demands of today’s job market?

A significant opportunity to enhance TVET quality and build stronger industry engagement lies in upgrading and expanding practical skills training. Public sector TVET centres alone lack the capacity and resources to provide the up-to-date practical skills and advanced technology required for modern industries.

For example, culinary practices serve as an excellent form of vocational training, offering practical skills that are essential in today’s global job market. Mst Kashmiri Sultana, Senior Lecturer of Tourism and Hospitality

Management at UPDATE College and Institute, and Certified Trainer and Assessor, National Skills Development Authority (NSDA) and Bangladesh Technical Education Board (BTEB), said, “Food-related subjects like hospitality, tourism, and culinary courses are in high demand globally, providing opportunities for those who may not pursue full-time degrees and are not from economically sound backgrounds. A diploma in culinary arts can give them valuable skills, enabling them to secure jobs and earn an income.”

She further added, “Culinary education offers both theoretical knowledge and industry training, preparing individuals to follow industry standards and even pursue entrepreneurship for a fulfilling career.”

To realise the full potential of TVET, collaboration between the public and private sectors is crucial. As Lotte Kejser points out, countries like Germany and Belgium successfully integrate work-based training with theoretical education, a model Bangladesh could follow. Private sector involvement in practical skills training would ensure that TVET graduates are better prepared for the modern workforce.

As Bangladesh struggles with high youth unemployment rates, enhancing the TVET and skill development system holds the key. The answer lies in the choices we make today – decisions that could either drive industrial growth and economic transformation or leave a generation behind.

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The authors are working at an international organisation in Bangladesh.