

Why millions in training funds haven't solved unemployment in Bangladesh



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Views expressed in this article are the author's own

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That schools do not prepare our young people well for the world of work is a frequent refrain. Graduate unemployment rate is reported to be three times higher, at 13.5 percent (in 2024), than the overall rate of unemployment. Youth unemployment (age 15-29 years) is about 10 percent, more than double the overall unemployment rate at under five percent. More alarming is that about 30 percent of youth are categorised as not in education, employment, or training (NEET). Are we pushing almost a third of youth into vulnerability to crime, drugs or depression?

Jobless economic growth is much more an economic policy problem than an education and training problem. About a dozen major projects on skill development and employment creation have been undertaken in Bangladesh in the last two decades. Their catchy titles suggest the variety of objectives they were expected to serve.

Skills for Employment Investment Program (SEIP) launched with Asian Development Bank support (2014-23) aimed to train youth in high-demand skills implemented through Palli Karma Shahayak Foundation (PKSF). Some 60,000 youth were trained in these courses per year, and it is reported that about 60 percent found jobs or became self-employed. Accelerating and Strengthening Skills for Economic Transformation (ASSET, 2021-26), funded by the World Bank, was designed to "equip future-ready youth with skills suited for the 4th Industrial Revolution", working with several ministries. In the Skills and Training Enhancement Project (STEP, 2010-19), the World Bank assisted the Ministry of Education to modernise polytechnics and promote public-private collaboration. The Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Reform project (2008-15), implemented with the International Labour Organization and European Union, helped prepare the National Technical and Vocational Qualifications Framework (NTVQF), meant to serve as a quality assurance standard in all skill training.

In the informal economy, as a successor to SEIP, the Recovery and Advancement of Informal Sector Employment (RAISE), supported by the World Bank, is being implemented by PKSF to help would-be young micro entrepreneurs with training and capital support.



FILE VISUAL: ORCHID CHAKMA

These and several other projects have expanded training opportunities and contributed to building the institutional support structure. Yet, complaints of mismatch and volume of graduate unemployment have not abated. Rough estimates based on Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics data indicate that 22 lakh youth enter the job market every year, but any kind of new jobs available are only about 14 lakh, leaving more than a third of new job-seekers unemployed. So, what has gone wrong?

Sociologist Philip Foster, six decades ago, wrote a seminal piece on what he called the vocational school fallacy. He critiqued the insertion of vocational courses in primary and secondary schools as an easy answer to youth unemployment. He argued that basic general education has the critical task of equipping

young people with the foundational skills of literacy and numeracy and helping them cultivate the thinking, reasoning, and values necessary to function as adults in work and life. Primary and secondary schools, especially in low-income countries, have a tough enough job teaching the foundational skills and should not have the added burden of vocational training. Experience of vocationalising general secondary schools has

been almost entirely negative. This evidence led the World Bank to shift its assistance to specialised vocational institutions since the 1980s. Foster's conclusion is even more pertinent today because the nature of jobs now changes rapidly, and workers need to be prepared to relearn and upgrade their skills.

Dani Rodrik and Rohan Sandhu at Harvard Kennedy School, based on a meta-analysis of skills and jobs linkages in developing economies, point to a difficult policy pathway for low-income countries. They conclude that the future of employment in developing countries lies mostly in services, even though industrialisation has been the historical road to growth and prosperity. Heavy capital and increasingly higher skill demands in manufacturing in today's economies make job creation and relevant skills development

difficult for low-income countries. The service sector's contribution to GDP is rising and will keep rising. Enhancing productivity in labour-absorbing services, therefore, has to be a priority for both employment growth and equity. The dilemma is that good models have not emerged about how to raise productivity in labour-absorbing services.

Rodrik and Sandhu suggest a combination of four strategies for developing economies.

retention, and promotion. It would emphasise training support for job-seekers working closely with employers, helping both to understand each other and to reshape the latter's human-resource practices.

Various government initiatives appear to reflect elements of the multi-pronged strategies proposed by Rodrik and others. However, the devil is in the details. The strategies to produce the results have to be contextualised. A few observations deserve serious attention from decision-makers. First, mandatory vocational and technical courses in upper primary and secondary schools risk falling into the trap of vocational school fallacy; schools should concentrate on foundational general skills.

Second, school curriculum renewal and rewriting remind us of the curriculum reform campaign of 2020-22, which backfired. A critical look at the curriculum is essential, focusing on how it is used in the classroom, how teachers, students and schools are supported to achieve learning outcomes, and on student assessment that supports learning. Third, National University needs to move away from the 4-year model, allowing flexible entry and exit through short certificate courses, 1-2 year diplomas, and 3-year degrees like the community college models in the US, Canada and Australia.

Fourth, various digital technology and skill development initiatives in schools have not paid off to the extent expected. A tab for each teacher and a digital hub for young people cannot work in isolation; connectivity, device support, relevant software, and learner-friendly interactive portals have to be ensured. Fifth, with over 80 percent of jobs in the low-skill informal economy, NGOs and private trainers are vital bridges to employment. However, the current system of treating these organisations as standard government vendors breeds corruption and inefficiency. To fix this, government bodies like the Bureau of Non-Formal Education and PKSF must abandon transactional contracts and instead build genuine, collaborative partnerships with proven NGOs and industry associations.

Sixth, dominance of projects funded by external loans led to a focus on disbursement and fund utilisation, with Ministry of Finance oversight limiting the involvement of key TVET bodies. A comprehensive and coordinated approach is needed for moving beyond temporary projects to a sustainable strategy.

International lessons and Bangladesh's own experience suggest that government policy and strategy need to create the conditions for non-state stakeholders, including the industries, private and NGO skills training providers, and communities, to be partners with a genuine stake in the programmes.

The missing science in our criminal justice system



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In Bangladesh, the discourse on controlling heinous crimes, particularly sexual violence and serial offences, routinely centres on legislative severity. While amending laws to incorporate the death penalty satisfied immediate public demand for retribution, it has failed to address a critical operational bottleneck in the country's criminal justice pipeline: the absolute absence of behavioural science in the investigative architecture. To transition from reactive policing to proactive deterrence, the home ministry and police leadership must initiate a structural and budgetary pivot towards institutionalising behavioural forensics.

Currently, the country's premier investigative agencies, such as the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) and the Detective Branch (DB) of police, operate primarily on traditional, clue-based methodologies. Investigations focus heavily on establishing the *corpus delicti* (the criminal act) and *mens rea* (criminal

intent) to secure convictions. However, modern criminology requires decoding the behavioural "signature" and psychological etiology of the offender—answering not just who committed the crime, but why and how their pathologically violent patterns evolved. Without systematic psychological profiling, our law enforcement apparatus remains blind to recidivism risks, making it virtually impossible to pre-emptively track or intercept serial offenders before they strike again.

To overcome this reactive impasse, Bangladesh must structurally realign its investigative paradigm with the risk-need-responsivity (RNR) model, a foundational framework in modern forensic criminology developed by psychologists Donald Andrews and James Bonta. The RNR framework dictates that judicial and investigative resources must be allocated proportionally to an offender's risk of reoffending, target dynamic criminogenic needs such as anti-

social personality traits or sexual deviance, and deliver interventions tailored specifically to the learning style and capacity of the offender. By ignoring these principles, our current investigative system treats all capital offenders as uniform legal entities rather than distinct psychological profiles. This systemic blind spot leaves the state incapable of identifying the latent behavioural triggers that transform a first-time offender into a serial predator.

The first practical step towards implementing this theoretical shift is the formal creation of a permanent Behavioural Analysis Unit (BAU) in law enforcement. This requires a calculated administrative overhaul rather than a simple reshuffling of existing personnel. The unit must not be populated exclusively by traditional cadre officers. Instead, it requires the permanent induction of clinical psychologists, behavioural scientists, and academic criminologists into the civil service framework or through long-term, specialised expert contracts. Concurrently, the state must build sustainable institutional pipelines with the departments of psychology, sociology, and criminology at universities, thereby transforming academic research into actionable, field-level investigative intelligence.

Such a structural overhaul is validated by extensive global precedents, which demonstrate that scientific investigation yields exponential returns on judicial

efficiency and national security. Empirical data indicate that when behavioural insights are structured within standard policing, the reliance on circumstantial luck drops dramatically. For instance, early landmark studies evaluating the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) profiling initiatives revealed that behavioural analysis successfully narrowed down suspect pools or provided vital investigative breakthroughs in approximately 77 percent of complex, motive-less cases. Similarly, extensive multi-agency research commissioned by the UK Home Office established that incorporating clinical and behavioural expertise expedited judicial outcomes and offered critical, actionable dimensions in up to 83 percent of specialised, high-stakes investigations.

Furthermore, behavioural forensics is not merely a tool for detection, but a proven mechanism for prevention when aligned with the responsivity principle. Comprehensive international meta-analyses have conclusively demonstrated that integrating cognitive-behavioural therapies and structured risk management frameworks within the correctional system reduces sexual offence recidivism rates by 30-40 percent.

However, this structural pivot is fundamentally impossible without a dedicated fiscal commitment. Historically, our national budget for police has disproportionately favoured logistical

maintenance, tactical procurement, and personnel deployment over scientific research and development. To bridge this gap, the national budget must explicitly earmark funds for a centralised behavioural and forensic database. Much like the Automated Fingerprint Identification System (AFIS), this repository must catalogue the psychological traits, behavioural triggers, childhood developmental anomalies, and post-crime signatures of violent offenders. Financing this infrastructure is not a theoretical luxury; it is a highly cost-effective strategy. By optimising state resources, a data-driven BAU drastically reduces investigative timelines, minimises misallocated judicial labour, and prevents the catastrophic societal costs of prolonged trials and wrongful convictions.

Continuing to rely solely on the deterrent myth of severe punishment while completely ignoring the criminal mind is an expensive and unsustainable administrative failure. True police modernisation must look beyond the procurement of weapons, riot gear, and patrol vehicles. Real, lasting reform lies in embedding behavioural science into the structural DNA of our investigative and forensic infrastructure. Until the state treats criminal psychology as an essential component of national security and judicial administrative reform, our criminal justice system will continue to treat the symptoms of deep social pathologies while leaving the root causes completely untouched.

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BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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TUESDAY'S ANSWERS

CAPOS

AWAKE

NASAL

ARTY

RED

YOUTHFUL

FEAR

MOUTHFUL

SANTKO

CREATE

EMAIL

NOTRE

TROY

IDOL

CRONE

RINSE

OYSTER

STY

TAOS

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