YOUTH DEVELOPMENT IN THE COVID-19 ERA AND BEYOND

October 2020

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SUMMARY

Lives of Bangladesh's 44 million youth have not been the same since March 8, 2020, when the country registered its first case of coronavirus disease (COVID-19). Closure of on-campus classes in educational institutions soon after made youth's future uncertain. Reduced economic activities slowed down the job creation rate, which increased youth unemployment. Limited human mobility and declining purchasing power of citizens meant that businesses led by young entrepreneurs were struggling to stay in operation. And all of this, coupled with health risks and uncertainties associated with COVID-19, took a toll on youth's mental health. Against this backdrop, we conducted a study to understand the impact of COVID-19 on youth's education, employment, entrepreneurial opportunities, and mental well-being. From April to September 2020, we surveyed 1,464 youth, aged between 18 and 35, across eight divisions of Bangladesh and consulted with educators and industry experts. Our purpose was to understand core challenges affecting youth in these four interconnected areas and identify possible strategies to address these challenges.
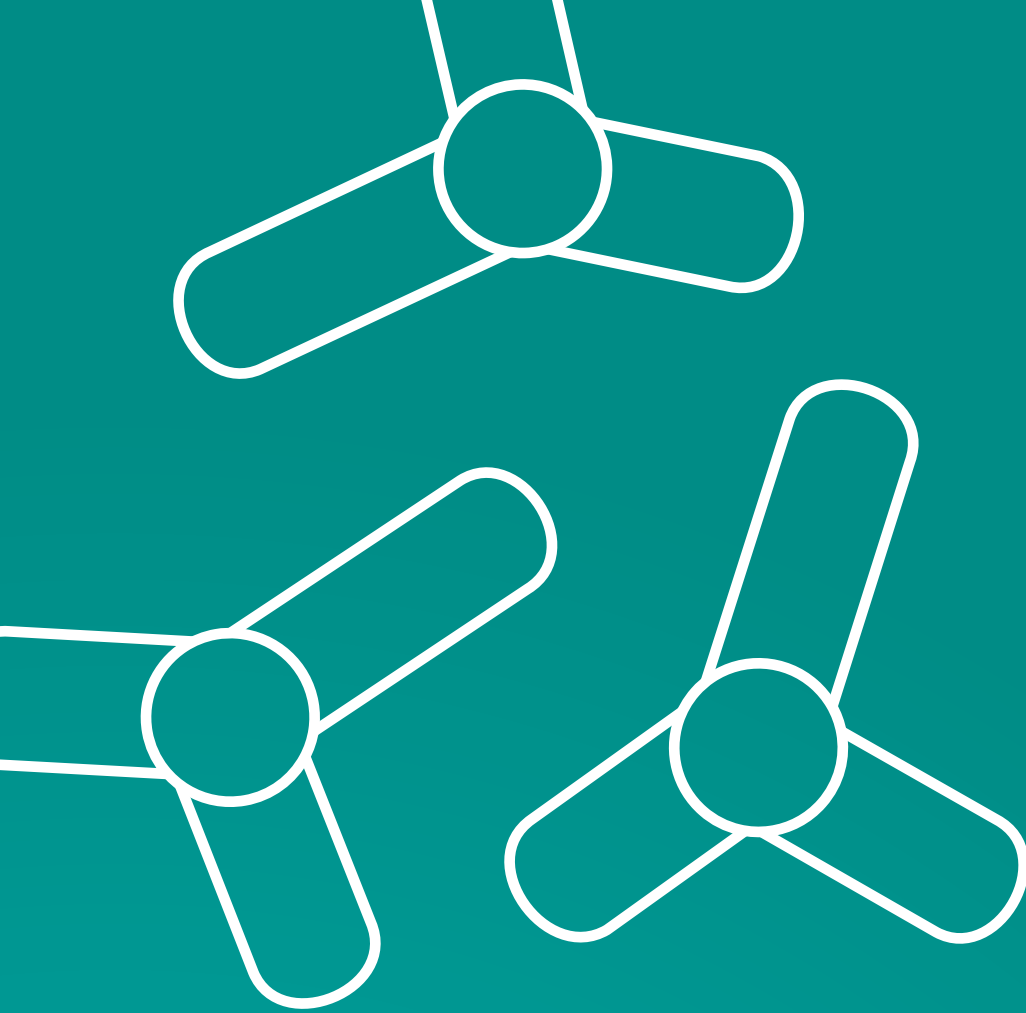
Education: During COVID-19, although remote learning strategies have been prioritized to keep education uninterrupted, regional and institution-wise disparity in digital infrastructure and readiness affected students' learning. More than 50% of the students surveyed found the online classes taken by the educational institutions to be ineffective due to a lack of interaction between the teachers and students. Such disruption in education can potentially lead to higher dropouts and may push youth toward anti-social activities such as drug abuse and violent extremism. In the recovery phase, focus should be given on improving the digital infrastructure support provided to educational institutions and students, building capacity of the teachers in taking classes online, and making resources for online learning widely available.

Skills and employment: COVID-19 has made the job market more challenging for youth and has given rise to the demand for a whole new set of skills. However, our youth are yet not recognizing the importance of acquiring such skills that can give them an edge in the job market. Among the youth surveyed, 48% said that they are not yet prepared for the job market challenges and 74% said that they are not taking any initiative to upskill themselves for post-COVID-19 job market challenges. In the months ahead, graduates will find it more difficult to find jobs. In the absence of collaboration between industry and academia and targeted skills development programs for youth, unemployment among educated youth will become more pronounced.

Entrepreneurship: COVID-19 made the business landscape challenging for young entrepreneurs. Even though some youth-led businesses in some industries were successful in navigating the situation, young entrepreneurs with limited resources suffered the most. Among the surveyed young entrepreneurs, 62% reported that they had to shut down their businesses temporarily or permanently due to COVID-19. Majority of the remaining 38% mentioned having a cash runway of one to three months. To recover, young entrepreneurs will need low-cost funding, digital and physical infrastructure (in the form of affordable co-working spaces), favorable policies, skills training, and mentorship support.

Mental well-being: COVID-19 is making youth stressed about their timely graduation, higher studies, and career prospects. This, in turn, is affecting their mental and emotional well-being. In Bangladesh, low-cost and youth-friendly mental health services are not adequate. Also, most of the youth do not have proper knowledge about mental health service providers and resources available in the country. To support youth in dealing with the mental and emotional crisis, focus needs to be given on running awareness campaigns to inform them about the importance of mental well-being and designing and developing low-cost and youth-friendly mental health services.
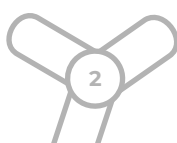
FUTURE OF EDUCATION

To find out how COVID-19 affected youth's education, we surveyed 698 college and university students. We also collected perspectives from five private and public university teachers. This section discusses how our education system can be more resilient in the face of a global pandemic.

Government was prompt to prioritize remote learning strategies to keep education uninterrupted; yet regional and institution-wise disparity in digital infrastructure and readiness affected students' learning

In March 2020, when on-campus classes were declared closed at educational institutions across the country, the government was quick in switching to remote learning. The University Grants Commission (UGC) of Bangladesh guided universities to go digital, but not all universities could make this happen due to capacity and resource constraints. Only 39% of the youth surveyed indicated that their educational institutions were offering online classes in July 2020. Institution category-wise and geographic disparity were found in terms of online class offerings.

■ Educational institutions that instantaneously adapted to online classes
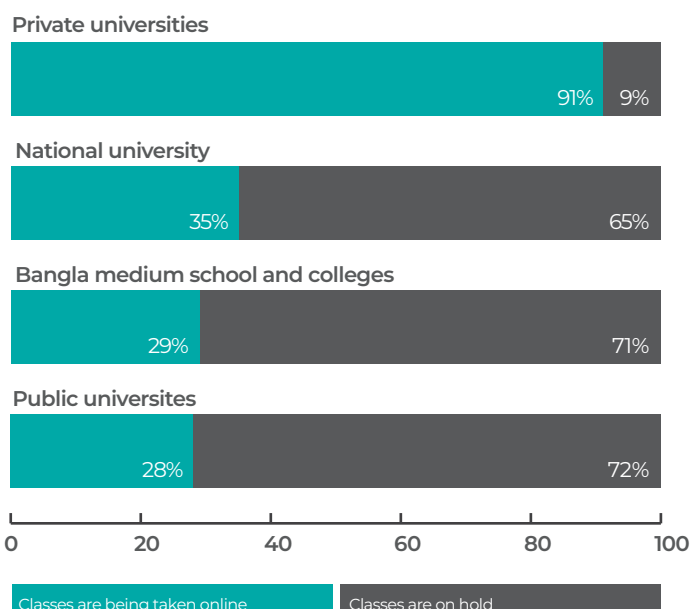
■ Geographic disparity in adapting to online classes
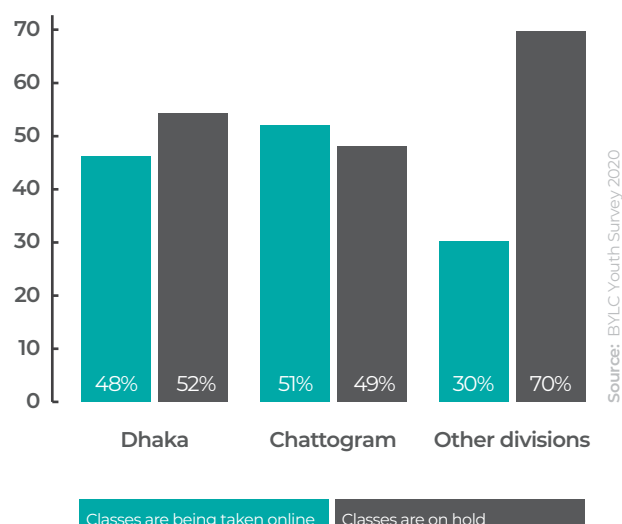
Source: BYLC Youth Survey 2020

Substantial progress has been made in digitizing education since July 2020. The Bangladesh Research and Education Network (BdREN) assisted educational institutions in setting up institutional Zoom accounts. BdREN also familiarized educators with the platform, helped them navigate the online learning environment, and supported them in making virtual classrooms more effective. To help students with any network connectivity issues, BdREN has set up a hotline number. A survey conducted by UGC in June 2020 showed that 86.6% of university students had smartphones.[1] To help the remaining students in attending classes online, UGC has taken an initiative to provide BDT 10,000 soft loan for purchasing smartphones to public university students with demonstrated financial need.

Although there has been significant progress in the shift to online education, there is still a long way to go. Poor internet connectivity, lack of smartphone/computer devices, and costly internet packages have affected students'—especially those from indigenous communities, madrasas, rural areas including chars, islands, and hills—participation in online classes. Internet affordability and access is still a major concern. Teletalk Bangladesh Limited is offering free online classroom facilities for university students on the BdREN platform, but the challenge is still there for many students using other cellular networks. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), only 5.6% of households in the country have access to a computer and 37.6% of households have access to internet services.[2]

[1] Ahmed, M. (2020, June 6). 86pc university students own smartphones in Bangladesh: Survey. Prothom Alo. https://en.prothomalo.com/youth/education/86pc-university-students-own-smartphones-in-bangladesh-survey

[2] Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS). (2019). Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS). http://bbs.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/bbs.portal.gov.bd/page/b343a8b4_956b_45ca_872f_4cf9b2f1a6e0/37817b8e25d0d6c1f442e294921ff85e.pdf

As online learning is a relatively new concept in Bangladesh, both teachers and students have found it difficult to adjust. More than 50% of the youth surveyed referred to online classes taken by educational institutions as 'slightly effective' and 'not that effective'

■ Students' perspective on the effectiveness of online classes taken by educational institutions

51%
Slightly effective/not that effective

49%
Very effective/effective
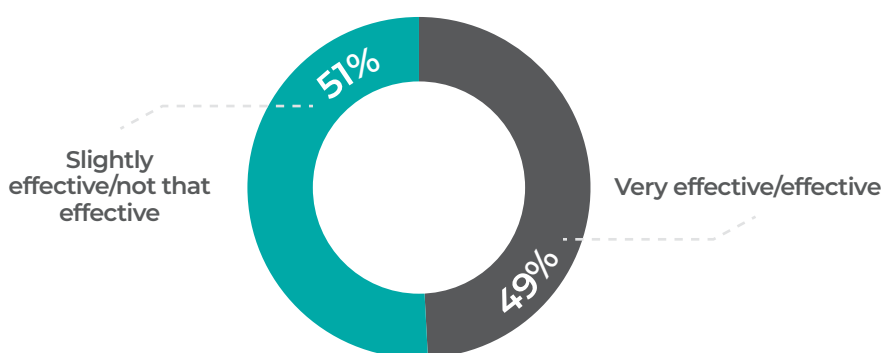
■ Reasons behind the ineffectiveness of online classes

| Lack of interaction among students | Lack of interaction with teachers | Teachers' inability to take classes online | Lack of online learning materials |

According to survey respondents, online classes taken by educational institutions were ineffective in maximizing their learning outcomes. Although theoretical subjects were easy to understand even on the online platform, many students, especially those from STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) backgrounds, found it difficult to understand classes where they needed practical demonstrations. Theoretical lectures took place online, but the lab classes were postponed or canceled in most of the universities. Many universities finished their semesters without taking the corresponding lab classes.

Many university students rely on university library books, journals, and computers to support their studies, and those were not accessible during the lockdown. When educational institutions were declared closed, university students living in university halls moved to their village homes, where internet connectivity was often limited. Many of the books taught at the university level are not available in e-book versions. Students could attend classes from their cellphones but could not work on assignments or projects that required computers. Before COVID-19, these students would avail their university computer labs for this purpose. Lack of familiarity and expertise of teachers with the online learning environment also affected the learning experience of students. Many teachers were not familiar with the methods of engaging students online, and therefore the students felt disconnected in online classes.

Socioeconomic consequences

Currently, the dropout rates are 38% in secondary and 19% in higher education, and this is expected to worsen due to COVID-19.[3] Many of these dropout students might never return to schools, colleges, or universities. In the absence of proper back-to-school or skill development programs, ensuring a decent livelihood will be difficult for these youth.

With reduced economic activity and increased poverty, young people are likely to become involved in income-generating activities to support their families. This will lead to higher dropouts. Apart from learning loss, the closure of educational institutions has also reduced youth's social engagement with peers. This isolation can put youth at greater risk of getting involved in anti-social activities such as drug abuse and violent extremism.

Way forward

DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE SUPPORT

• Private sector organizations and NGOs providing skills development training can put in place training models where marginalized youth will receive equipment and internet support along with training

• The government has already taken initiatives to provide subsidized access to internet services to students through Teletalk Bangladesh Limited. Partnership with other telecommunications operators can speed up this process and support a wider youth group using mobile services other than Teletalk

• UGC has taken initiatives to provide an interest-free loan to students to purchase digital devices for attending online classes. This process needs to be accelerated to minimize the loss of learning

CAPACITY BUILDING OF TEACHERS

• Needs assessments should be carried out before designing and conducting teacher training programs to identify areas that need to be targeted while designing the training

• Organizations that are already working on providing online training for youth can design and develop training modules to train teachers on ways to engage youth in online classes

ONLINE LEARNING RESOURCES

• Students may be offered free access to e-learning resources, such as e-books, online journals, articles, and online courses

• Government, in collaboration with the private sector organizations and NGOs, can work on the design and development of simulation-based online courses to teach subjects requiring practical demonstrations

• Short-term online skills development courses on professional development for youth who dropped out of their education institutes can be organized to help them enter the job market

DEVELOPING ONLINE LEARNING SUPPORT SYSTEM

• As many youth mentioned that online courses are challenging because there is no way to clarify their queries, one effective alternative can be instructor-led virtual classes where students will be able to interact with the instructor as well as their peers

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[3] Mamun, S. (2020, August 7). Covid-19: Over 45% secondary school students may drop out. Dhaka Tribune. https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2020/08/07/covid-19-over-45-secondary-school-students-may-drop-out?fbclid=IwAR0A525j6PvzUkAlN3zjAWrnmuiKL7U fRCbuWD5E_9x9PqFOPDV8GzfiLpwc1f442e294921ff85e.pdf

FUTURE OF
SKILLS & EMPLOYMENT

To find out how COVID-19 affected the demand for skills and how youth perceive the changing nature of the workplace, we surveyed 565 youth (young professionals and students who will join the job market in a year or two). We also collected the employer's perspective on the skills that will be required in the coming years. This section discusses the skills that employers value and how youth can prepare for emerging job market challenges.

COVID-19 has accelerated technological advancement and created the demand for a whole new range of skills

As companies worldwide have transitioned to remote work due to COVID-19, the ability to work and collaborate virtually has become an essential skill. According to employers in different sectors, youth need to focus on learning agility, virtual collaboration, adaptability, resilience, working remotely, emotional intelligence, data analytics, and machine learning. According to industry experts, in the coming years, jobs will be created in sectors like IT, FMCG, e-commerce, and digital marketing.

▍Technical skills employers value for emerging job market challenges

Data analytics and data literacy	Digital marketing	Artificial intelligence	Cyber security	Big data

Machine learning	Cloud computing

▍Soft skills employers value for emerging job market challenges

Negotiation	Resilience	Adaptability	Problem solving	Virtual teamwork

Innovation	Agility	Communication	Creativity	Critical thinking

Working remotely	Leadership	Emotional intelligence

74% of the surveyed youth said that they are not taking any initiative to upskill themselves for post-COVID-19 job market challenges; the remaining 26% mentioned upskilling or reskilling themselves through different online training programs
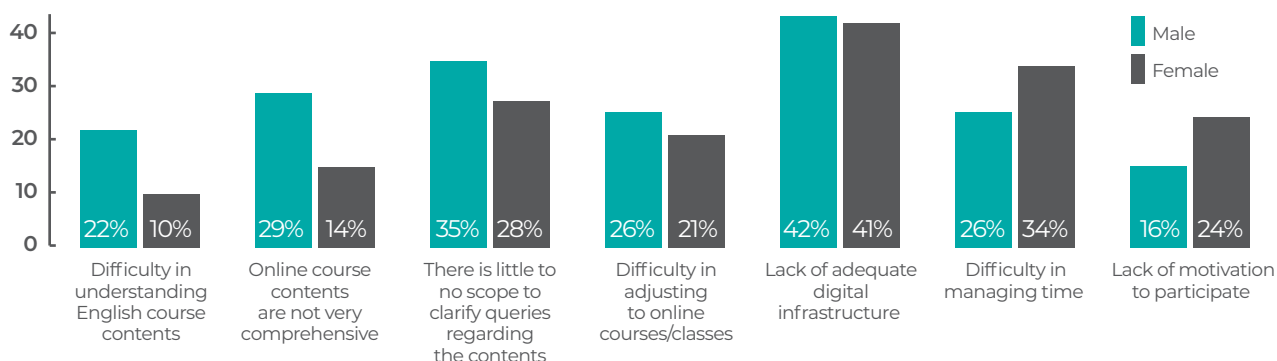
Youth's preparedness for job market challenges

I am not upskilling/reskilling myself for post-COVID-19 job market challenges

74%

26%

I am upskilling/reskilling myself for post-COVID-19 job market challenges

Male	73%	27%
Female	76%	24%

0   20   40   60   80   100

■ I am not upskilling/reskilling myself for post-COVID-19 job market challenges   ■ I am upskilling/reskilling myself for post-COVID-19 job market challenges
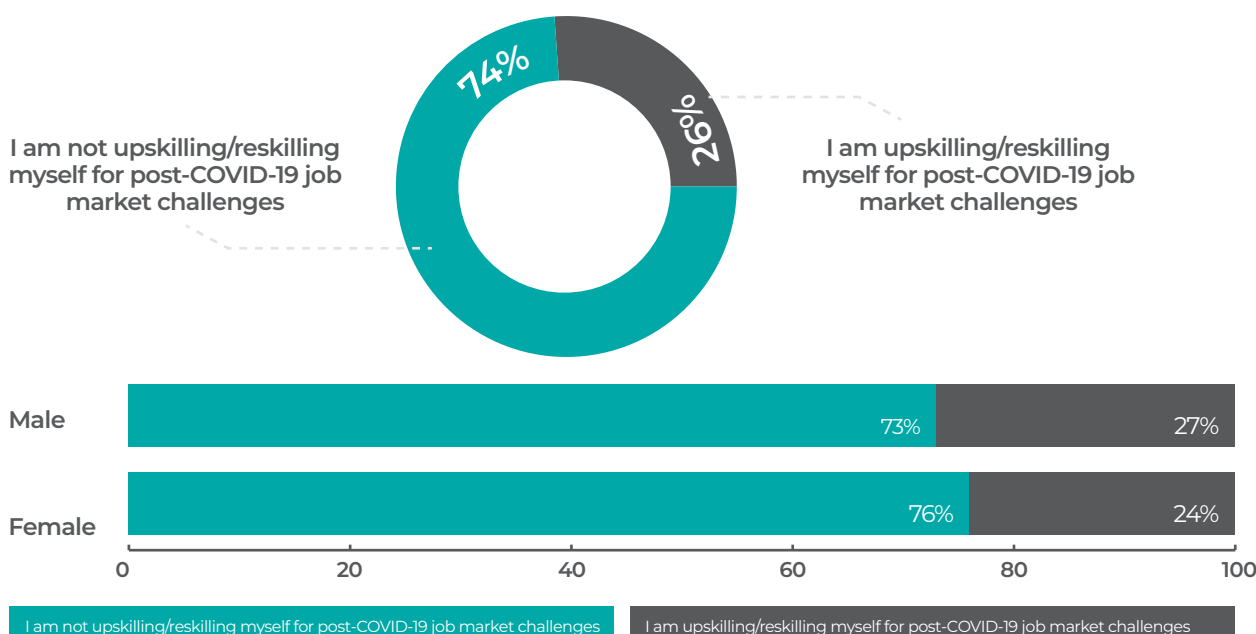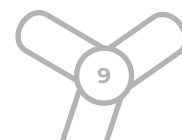
The majority of the youth are not yet recognizing the importance of acquiring new technical and soft skills to prepare for the challenges of the future job market. Only 26% of the youth surveyed reported participating in training programs on different online learning platforms, such as the Learning & Earning Development (LEDP) project, 10 Minute School, BYLCx, Bohubrihi, Udemy, EMK Center, and Coursera. This shows a lack of awareness among the general youth about online learning resources.

Youth mentioned various reasons for not participating in online training programs. Many youth mentioned that there is not much scope to clarify their confusion in self-paced online courses. According to the survey, women find it more difficult to manage time for such training programs than men which can be attributed to women's higher engagement in household responsibilities when compared to men in Bangladesh.

Challenges faced in participating in online training programs

■ Male
■ Female

	Difficulty in understanding English course contents	Online course contents are not very comprehensive	There is little to no scope to clarify queries regarding the contents	Difficulty in adjusting to online courses/classes	Lack of adequate digital infrastructure	Difficulty in managing time	Lack of motivation to participate
Male	22%	29%	35%	26%	42%	26%	16%
Female	10%	14%	28%	21%	41%	34%	24%

Socioeconomic consequences

Graduate unemployment in Bangladesh was high even before COVID-19. According to the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS), the country's graduate unemployment rate was 38.66% in 2019.[4] Due to the reduced economic activities caused by COVID-19, most of the employers in Bangladesh went for a hiring freeze which resulted in a slower rate of job creation across different sectors of the economy. As a result, graduates will find it more difficult to find jobs in the coming years. The changing world of work, including technical changes and digitization, will make many existing jobs obsolete. In the absence of real-time collaboration and integration between industry and academia and targeted skills training programs for youth, unemployment among educated youth will become more pronounced in the years ahead.

Way forward

|	
PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP	• Government can partner with private sector organizations and NGOs providing online skills development training to speed up digital content creation and conduct online classes effectively
SKILLS DEVELOPMENT TRAINING	• Government, private sector organizations, and NGOs can collaborate to develop content for training programs to equip youth with skills necessary to thrive in a post-COVID-19 job market; focus should be given on wider accessibility, especially among youth from marginalized backgrounds
DEMAND-DRIVEN SKILLS TRAINING	• Skills training should be demand-driven, not supply-driven; organizations providing online training should work with employers to design and develop training courses per employers' needs; focus should be given on both soft and technical skills

[4] Mahmud, M, Iqbal, Z., Shahana, S., Islam, S., & Ibon, W. F. (2018). Tracer Study of Graduates of Universities in Bangladesh. Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS). http://hdl.handle.net/11540/9678
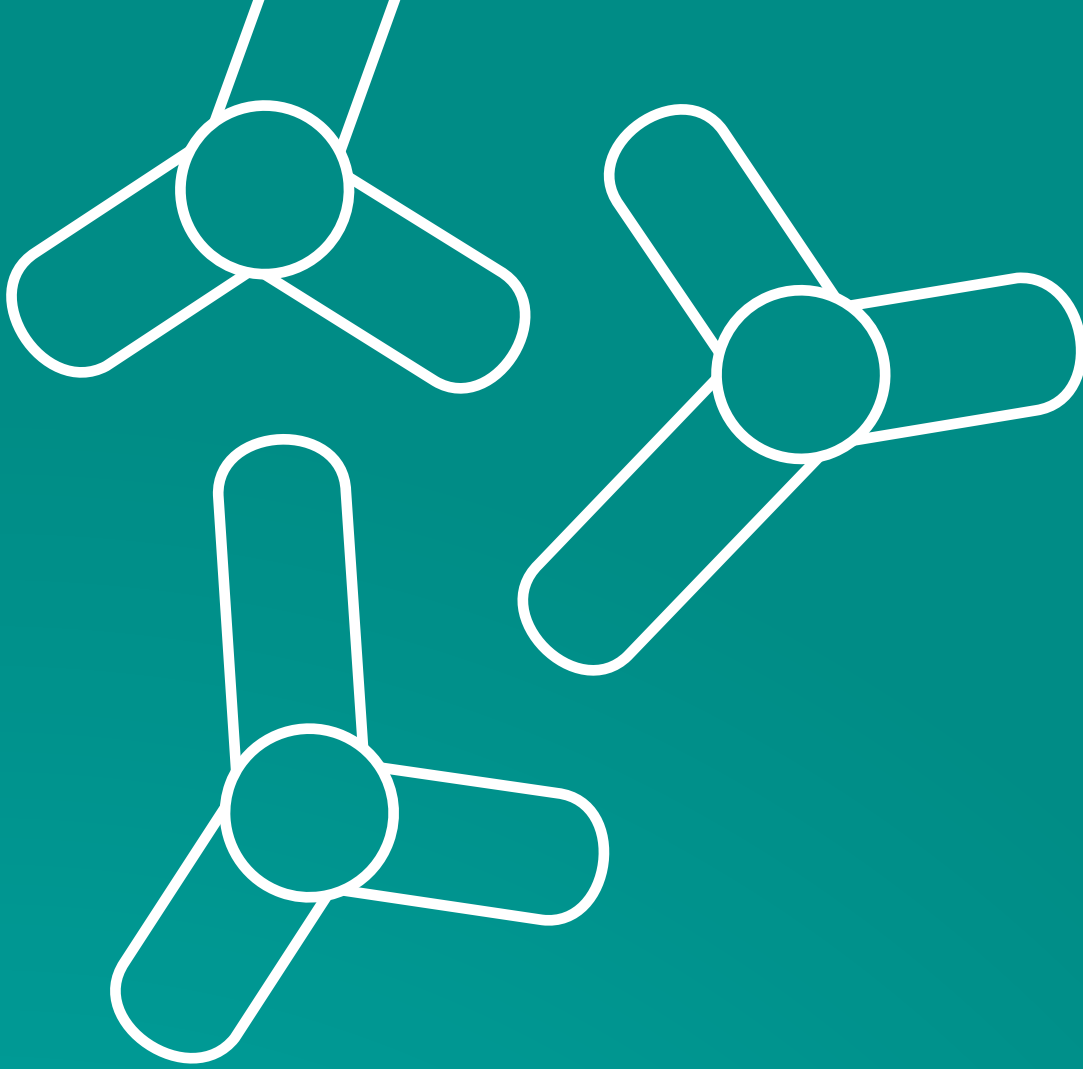
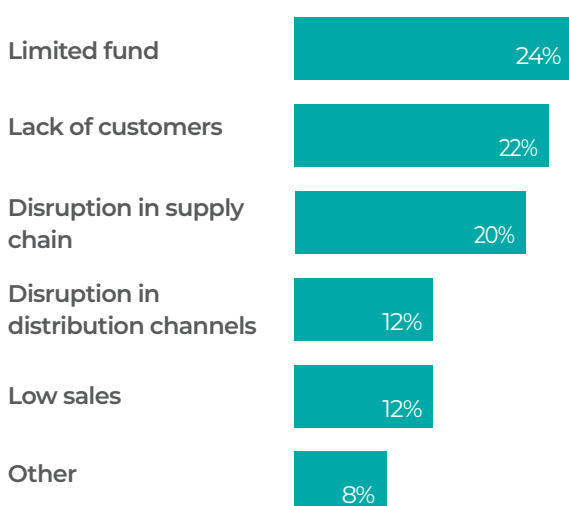# FUTURE OF BUSINESS LANDSCAPE FOR YOUNG ENTREPRENEURS

To find out how youth-led small- and medium-sized enterprises were affected by COVID-19, we collected data from 50 young entrepreneurs. The operating age of the businesses considered in this study is between one and three years. This section discusses how young entrepreneurs have been affected by COVID-19 and what support might help them in the coming months.

COVID-19 has made it difficult for young entrepreneurs with small businesses to operate in the competitive business landscape of the country
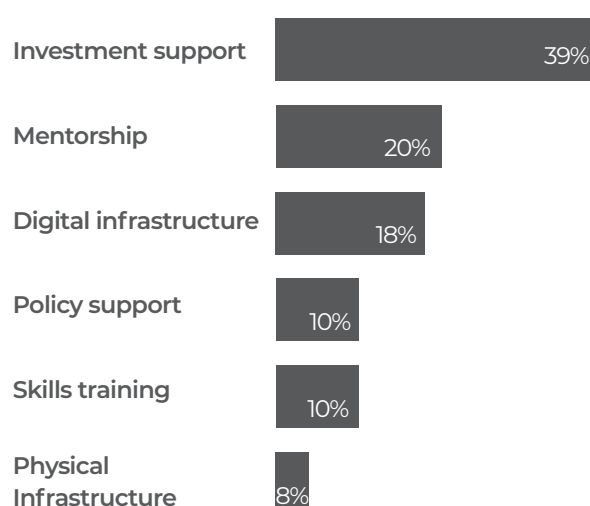
Bangladesh's startup ecosystem is still at the nascent stage, and therefore too fragile to cope with the economic crisis resulting from COVID-19. Although a few start-ups in some industries have been successful in navigating this situation, young entrepreneurs with limited resources have suffered the most. At the time of the survey, 62% of young entrepreneurs reported that they had to shut down their business temporarily or permanently due to the pandemic. Most of the young entrepreneurs surveyed reported having a cash runway of two to three months.

Many early-stage businesses were affected by the shift in consumer behavior and consumption pattern resulting from COVID-19. Although e-commerce and logistics startups have fared better than many other businesses, their operations have also suffered. The demand for home delivery services increased because of COVID-19, but the cost of transporting products has also increased, leading to an increase in the prices of products. Besides, ensuring the safety of the delivery persons and maintaining proper safety measures while delivering the products increased the operating costs.

Reasons behind temporary/permanent closure of businesses

Reason	%
Limited fund	24%
Lack of customers	22%
Disruption in supply chain	20%
Disruption in distribution channels	12%
Low sales	12%
Other	8%

Support needed by young entrepreneurs

Support	%
Investment support	39%
Mentorship	20%
Digital infrastructure	18%
Policy support	10%
Skills training	10%
Physical Infrastructure	8%

When the general lockdown started due to COVID-19, some young entrepreneurs tried diversifying their products or services for the survival of their businesses but could not do so due to limited capital and lack of experience in dealing with such a situation. Future business prospects for young entrepreneurs do not look promising in the absence of low-cost funding, digital and physical infrastructure (in the form of affordable co-working spaces), favorable policies, and skills training and mentoring support.

Socioeconomic consequences

In the coming years, entrepreneurship education and support for youth will be more pertinent as job creation is falling across different sectors and will take a few years to bounce back to the previous normal. If young entrepreneurs are not provided with the required support to grow their businesses in the changing business landscape, youth with creative entrepreneurial ideas will be demotivated to start their own ventures. This will adversely affect the job creation rate and increase youth unemployment.

Way forward

ACCESS TO FINANCE

• Small businesses need to be provided with easy-to-access, low-cost funding, and other support related to business registration. StartUp Bangladesh Limited is working on this front. With scaling, such initiatives can have a stronger impact on Bangladesh's entrepreneurial landscape

MENTORSHIP SUPPORT

• Business incubators and accelerators can make a significant contribution by guiding early-stage youth-led businesses to weather the initial storm and adjust to changing market dynamics at a rapid pace

• Knowledge sharing sessions can be facilitated by organizations working with young entrepreneurs where businesses that have been successful in continuing their business operations during COVID-19 can share their strategies for success

PRIORITIZING ENTREPRENEURSHIP EDUCATION

• In the coming years, focus should be given on incorporating entrepreneurial skills into our education curriculum so that youth can develop an entrepreneurial mindset from an early age

ENTREPRENEURSHIP TRAINING

• Many youth who are willing to start their own business hesitate to do so because of a lack of entrepreneurial skills. Organizations working with youth development programs can design and develop short courses in specific areas of entrepreneurship, such as business finance, people management, legal aspects, fundraising, etc.
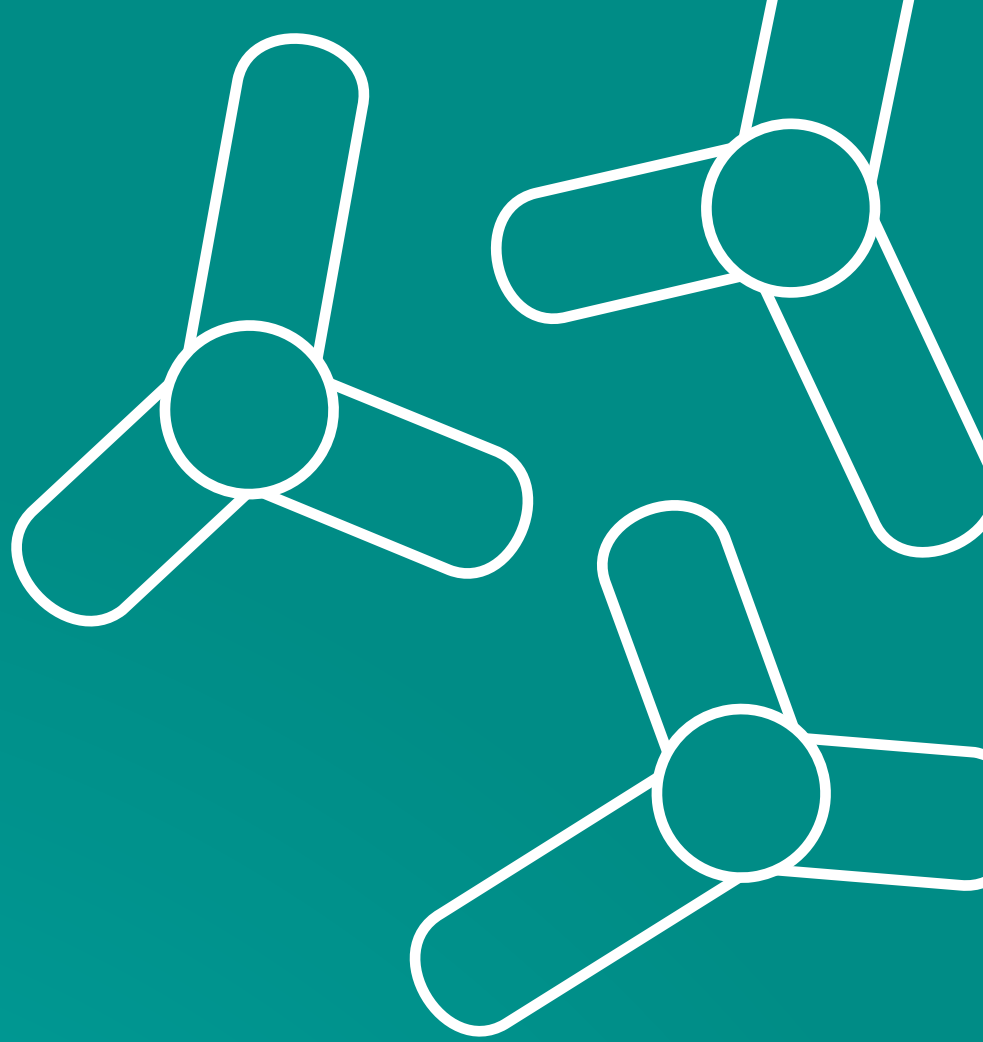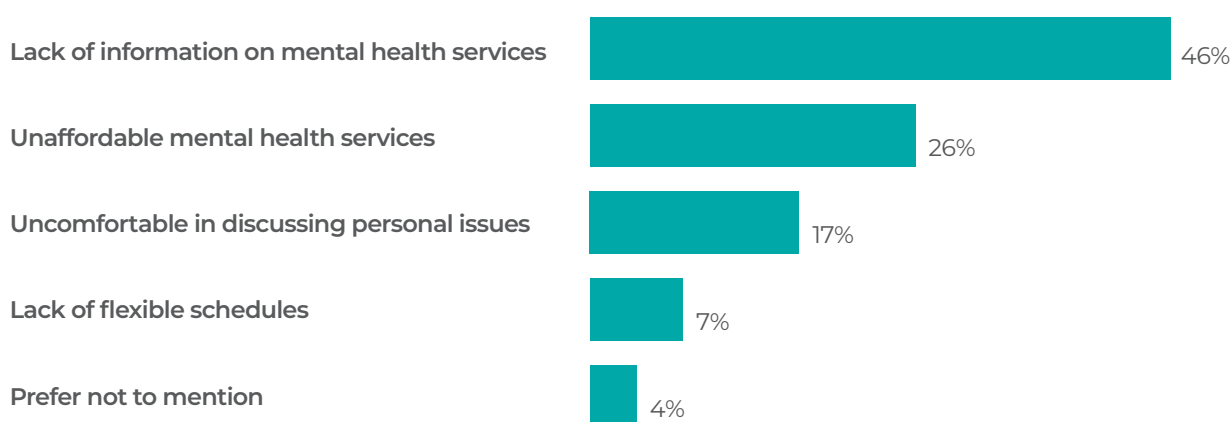
MENTAL WELL-BEING OF YOUTH

Based on the data from 1,464 youth participating in this study, this section discusses how COVID-19 affected the mental and emotional well-being of young people, the situation of the country's mental health support system, and the measures that can help youth in dealing with this situation.

COVID-19 has led youth to stress about their timely graduation, higher studies, and career. This, in turn, is affecting their mental and emotional well-being

Around 61% of the surveyed youth mentioned experiencing mental stress due to the COVID-19 situation. Emotional upheavals resulting from COVID-19 were found to be higher among youth from lower-income and lower-middle-income backgrounds, irrespective of gender. Around 40% of the women respondents indicated that they were mentally and emotionally stressed as they were subjected to different physical, mental, and economic abuses during this period.

Reasons behind not seeking mental health support

Lack of information on mental health services	46%
Unaffordable mental health services	26%
Uncomfortable in discussing personal issues	17%
Lack of flexible schedules	7%
Prefer not to mention	4%

Only 20% of the youth who went through an emotional crisis during COVID-19 took expert advice to deal with the situation. When it comes to dealing with mental or emotional crises, help-seeking behavior has yet to become common in our culture. Women are more reluctant in seeking mental health services. Along with reservations from their family, one of the other major reasons behind such reluctance is the social taboo revolving around mental health issues. In many cases, girls and women, particularly from lower and lower-middle-income backgrounds, are not financially independent to afford mental health support services.

Adequate mental health support services are not available in Bangladesh. Traditional ways to address mental health issues are expensive, less effective, and not youth-friendly. As per the Mental Health Services Directory, Bangladesh, the average cost of an individual session with a private mental health counselor in the country is BDT 800–1,000 (~USD 9–11). Youth are not even fully aware of the mental health services available for them and therefore do not know how or where to seek professional help when needed. Our educational curriculum does not place sufficient emphasis on mental health. Even when health information is made available in primary or secondary schools, it focuses mainly on physical well-being.

Socioeconomic consequences

Having a large youth population, the growth of Bangladesh is dependent on the mental, physical, social, and economic well-being of its young people. If the mental well-being of youth is not ensured, it will lead to reduced productivity and limit their capacity to lead fulfilling lives. Youth with mental health issues also experience depression, which sometimes can lead to self-harm or even suicide. Moreover, youth with mental health disorders are susceptible to getting involved in anti-social activities, including drug abuse and violent extremism.

Way forward

AWARENESS ON AVAILABLE MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

• More awareness campaigns need to be run to inform youth about the available mental health services

• Government, in partnership with youth organizations, can set up a database of mental health service providers and make it widely accessible to young people across all socio-economic backgrounds

MENTAL HEALTH LITERACY

• Adding mental health education to our school and college curriculum could help improve mental health knowledge

• Online training sessions can be organized to train youth on the importance of mental health literacy

• Organizations working with youth can follow a training-for-trainers (ToT) model where youth will receive mental health literacy and first-aid training and then work as trainers to spread awareness

ECONOMIC AND YOUTH-FRIENDLY MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

• Government, private organizations, and NGOs should collaborate and design cost-effective mental health services for youth especially those from lower and lower middle-income groups; mental health services can be provided through digital channels to ensure wider accessibility
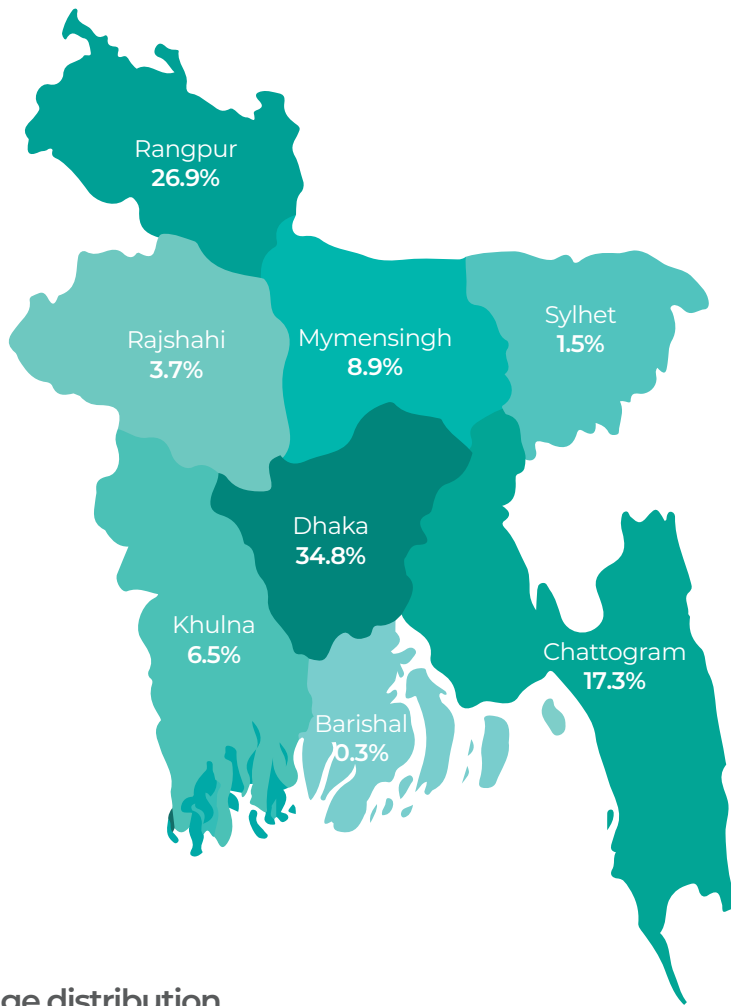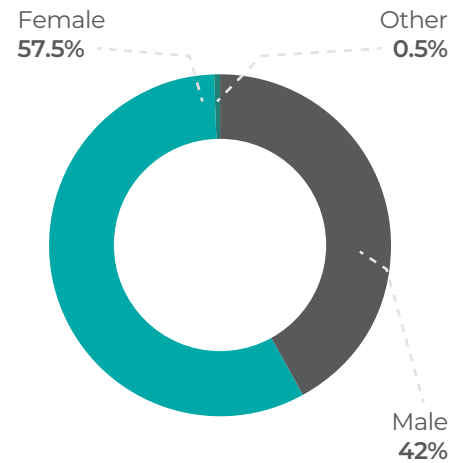
METHODOLOGY

1,464 youth, aged between 18 and 35, across eight divisions of Bangladesh were surveyed for this study. The respondents included students, graduates looking for jobs, young professionals, and young entrepreneurs. Among the students, there was representation from 35 public universities, 34 private universities, 70 colleges under National University, and 17 TVET institutes. Also, there were students of Bangla and English medium institutions and madrasas. Additionally, to get a deeper understanding on the issues, we conducted focus group discussions (FGD) and key informant interviews (KII) with each of these youth categories as well as education and industry experts.

We surveyed 1,464 youth, aged between 18 and 35, across Bangladesh and conducted FGDs and KIIs with key stakeholders
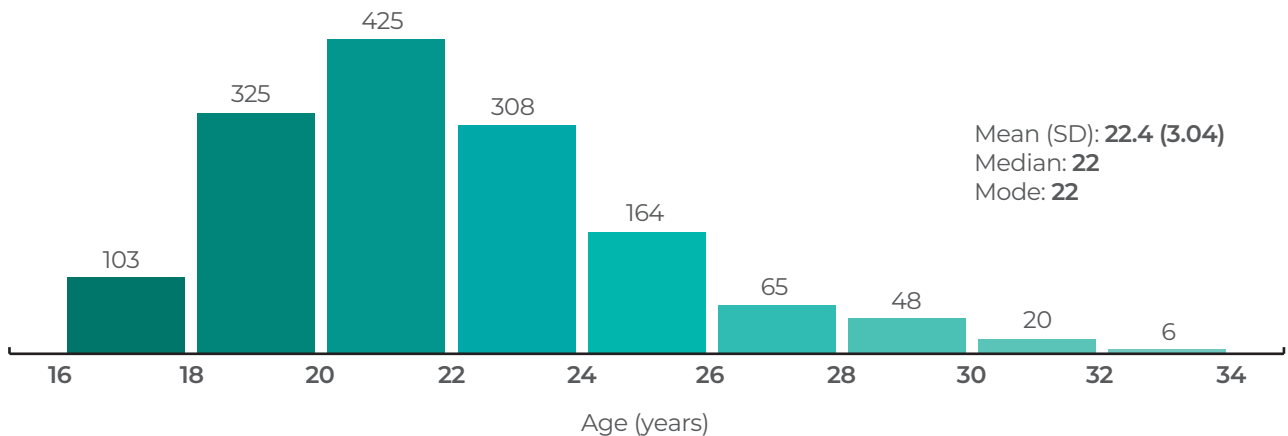
■ Geographic coverage

Rangpur
26.9%

Rajshahi
3.7%

Mymensingh
8.9%

Sylhet
1.5%

Dhaka
34.8%

Khulna
6.5%

Barishal
0.3%

Chattogram
17.3%

■ Gender distribution

Female
57.5%

Other
0.5%

Male
42%

FGD with eight final year university students

FGD with nine young professionals

FGD with eight entrepreneurs

KII with five educators

KII with five employers

KII with four fresh graduates

■ Age distribution

Age	Count
16	103
18	325
20	425
22	308
24	164
26	65
28	48
30	20
32	6

Age (years)

Mean (SD): **22.4 (3.04)**
Median: **22**
Mode: **22**

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About BYLC

Bangladesh Youth Leadership Center (BYLC), the country's first leadership institute, was founded with the vision of creating a just, prosperous, inclusive society by training the next generation of leaders. Our mission is to enable youth to have high impact in public, private, and civil sectors by equipping them with leadership skills and connecting them to jobs and entrepreneurial opportunities. Over the past 12 years, we have trained more than 6,000 high school, college, and university students, many of whom are now exercising leadership in diverse sectors.

Skills | Values | Jobs | Ventures

BYLC Bangladesh Youth Leadership Center   **BYLC** Office of Professional Development (OPD)   **BYLCx**   **BYLC**ventures

Youth development
in the COVID-19 era and beyond