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KEY MESSAGES

- Skills and education are immediate concerns because the imperatives of economic diversification and moving up the value chain will require higher levels of education and more and different skills.
- The "demographic dividend" has created a proportionately very large working-age cohort, the majority of whom are in school, implying that the educational system will have to be up to par to produce a labor force that is able to support a modernized economy for decades to come.
- Linkages between employers and most technical and vocational education and training (TVET) institutions are limited, leading to little responsiveness of TVET to job market demands.
- TVET could be an important element of Bangladesh's future economic development and could be made a central focus of its education system as a way to prepare for rapid industrialization.

SKILLS DEVELOPMENT IN BANGLADESH

Copublication of the Asian Development Bank and the International Labour Organization Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific

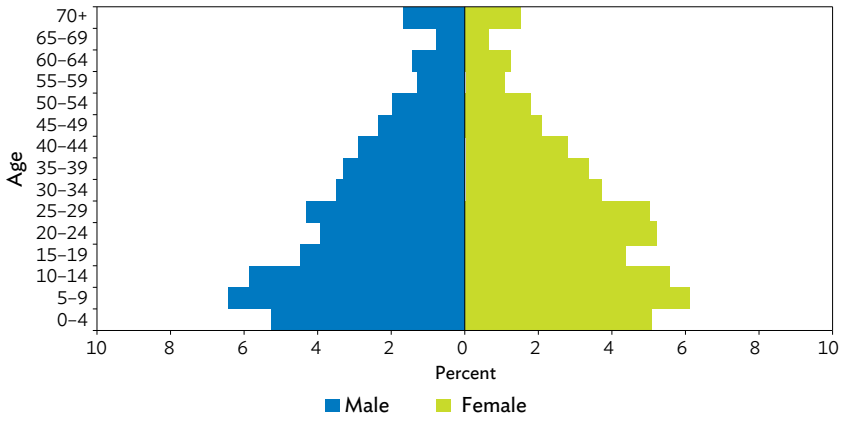
INTRODUCTION

The demographic dividend that has been created in Bangladesh has produced a large working-age population that will need adequate education to support a modernizing economy. A demographic dividend is a period in which a proportionally large working-age population results from the rapid fall in birth rates. In Bangladesh, this phenomenon has been occurring since the 1970s. The large working-age population implies that if decent employment opportunities are available, the country can be more productive collectively, as more people contribute to overall economic activity.

In 1989, people aged 15–64 made up only 54% of Bangladesh's population. By 2016, this share was estimated to be 66% and was forecast to continue to rise to 69% in 2022 through 2044 (United Nations 2015).

The figure presents the demographic pyramid showing the rapid transition to relatively large youth cohorts joining or soon to join the workforce. The largest age cohort, ages 5–9, will be joining the workforce in just a few years.

Demographic Pyramid, 2011 (%)



Source: Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. 2011. Population and Housing Census. Dhaka.

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50 YEARS

ADB

Table 1: Education of the Labor Force, Aged 15 and Over (%)

Level of Education	Total Labor Force	Female Labor Force	Male Labor Force	Urban Labor Force	Rural Labor Force
None	21.2	21.3	21.2	5.7	27.3
Primary (Class I–V)	28.2	33.5	25.9	21.6	30.8
Secondary (Class VI–X)	30.4	29.0	31.1	36.2	28.2
Higher Secondary (Class XI–XII)	13.4	11.6	14.2	21.0	10.4
Tertiary (All degrees or diplomas)	6.3	4.3	7.2	15.3	2.8
Others/Unknown	0.4	0.4	0.5	0.2	0.5

Source: Calculations using data from the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. 2015. *Labour Force Survey 2013.* Dhaka.

The demographic dividend provides great opportunities for a country, yet it is also a critical time to improve the quality of the labor force. With large cohorts preparing to enter the workforce and smaller cohorts falling behind, the quality and volume of education and skills training need to be improved urgently.

A little over one-fifth of the labor force has no formal education whatsoever, with a similar rate for men and women (Table 1). More than a quarter has received only some years of primary education, while around 30% has made it to secondary school. The remaining 20% has attended upper secondary school or above, with just over 6% having received tertiary education. Overall educational attainment is higher for men in the labor force, with the largest proportional gender differences at the highest levels of education.

The labor force as a whole is somewhat better educated than the general population. Overall, 26% of the population has received no education, while a further 30% have only some primary education (BBS 2015). For women, the education gap between the general population and the labor force is large, because of different patterns in labor force participation.

Still, the overall education level of the workforce remains relatively low, although it has improved tremendously in just a few years, as large young cohorts have entered the workforce and enrollment rates have increased dramatically. In 2013, 21.2% of the labor force (compared with 40% in 2010) had no education, while 28.2% had primary education (compared with 23% in 2010) (Table 1). The proportion of those with secondary education also increased dramatically. In 2013, the proportion with tertiary education rose to 6.3%, whereas in 2010, it was only 3.7%. These changes are enormous for a gap of only 3 years between the surveys.

ACCESS TO SKILLS TRAINING

Technical and vocational education and training (TVET) has expanded rapidly in Bangladesh over the last 15 years. In 2000, only 110,000 people enrolled in formal TVET programs, but enrollment rose to 448,000 by 2010 and to 690,000 by 2014 (BANBEIS). The share of women in TVET enrollment has been and remains low, persisting at the 24%–25% range throughout the 2000s and rising modestly to 27% in recent years.

Notably, only 16% of women were trained at public institutions in 2014. The lack of improvement in women's share of TVET instruction is especially striking given the rise in female labor force participation over this period.

There are important regional variations in the provision of training and in the desire for training. The percentage of the labor force that had received training in the previous 12 months of the survey shows Dhaka (9.9%) and Chittagong (8.4%) having the greatest share (Table 2). Rangpur had the smallest proportion of workers being trained; however, it had the largest proportion of the labor force who would like to receive training. This strongly suggests that the current level of training provided in Rangpur is inadequate.

Table 2: Labor Force Receiving and Wanting Training (%)

Region	Percentage Who Have Received Training	Percentage Wanting Training of Any Type
Barisal	8.0	22.0
Chittagong	8.4	22.6
Dhaka	9.9	18.5
Khulna	6.9	21.0
Rajshahi	7.2	14.2
Rangpur	5.8	30.0
Sylhet	7.9	17.3

Source: Calculations using data from the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. 2015. *Labour Force Survey 2013.* Dhaka.

More generally, those in rural areas received much less training. In the general population, the proportion receiving training in urban areas was more than two and a half times higher than in rural areas. While it is not immediately obvious how much of this gap comes from the demand for training as opposed to the supply, it is certainly the case that in general urban areas have more training facilities

than rural areas. The greater population density in urban areas also means that, on average, workers will be closer to training facilities, making it cheaper and more convenient for them to obtain training.

Dhaka division, in which the highest proportion of workers received training, has a relatively low implied demand for training, which suggests that a reasonable amount of training is available in the capital's division. The Rajshahi division displays yet another pattern: a relatively low level of training provided, but also a low level of desire for training.

In Bangladesh, a large proportion of the workforce receive training, but the definition of training in the labor force survey is broad—it includes everything from very brief courses through to postgraduate study. The proportion of trainees was nearly evenly split between courses of 4 weeks or shorter (50.7%) and those of longer duration (49.3%).

There are many different types of training providers in Bangladesh, including private institutions, government institutions operated by various ministries, as well as local and international nongovernment organizations (NGOs). About 59.3% of people received training from private institutions while 22.4% received training from government institutions (Table 3). To some extent, it is possible that the true contribution of government training is understated, as the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training, a major source of government-provided training, is focused on international migrant workers. To the extent that such workers are not present in the country to be surveyed, such training may have been undercounted.

Table 3: Source of Training Received in Previous 12 Months (%)

Source	Overall Trained	Women Trained	Men Trained
Government institutions	22.4	23.9	21.7
Private institution	59.3	51.6	62.5
Nongovernment organization	11.0	16.8	8.6
Foreign institute	0.5	0.5	0.5
Joint venture	3.5	4.0	3.3
Other institutes	3.2	3.2	3.2

Source: Calculations using data from the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. 2015. *Labour Force Survey 2013.* Dhaka.

Many NGOs provide different forms of training. Training by NGOs accounted for 11% of all trainees; but the difference between men and women differs substantially, with NGOs accounting for 16.8% of female trainees, and only 8.6% of male trainees. Despite this difference, NGOs still train more men than women because of the much greater number overall of male trainees. Thus, while NGOs focus more on providing technical skills to women than other sorts of institutions do, the focus is only relative. Other types of institutions account for the balance of about 7% of trainees.

Government institutions are only one component of the overall training system and provide training only to a minority of students. Yet they are more important in providing in-depth training. Government institutions provided more than 40% of training that lasted 3 months or longer.

An important question is whether the training obtained by the workers is consistent with the present pattern of economic development and aligned with the needs of economic diversification. The following discussion on training received and training desired may help shed light on this issue.

Computing was by far the most popular training course, accounting for 42%, or nearly 2 million people trained in the 12 months before the survey (Table 4). The private sector provides a large majority of the training. But it is not entirely clear whether this level of training is in line with the economy's needs. Nearly 2 million people were training on computing annually, but only about 144,000 were employed in the information technology (IT) sector, though this count does not include those working with computing in other sectors of the economy.

Table 4: Main Areas of Training Received and Desired in Previous 12 Months (%)

Area	Overall Trained	
	Training Received	Training Desired
Engineering	2.2	1.3
Computing	42.0	30.8
Leather and Textile	0.6	0.4
Hospitality	3.2	1.0
Handicrafts	6.0	13.4
Agriculture	10.9	15.1
Health	4.9	1.9
Office Management	1.6	1.5
Driving and Mechanics	8.6	5.8
Beautician and Hairdressing	1.8	1.8
Foreign Language	1.9	1.2
Construction and Related Trades	3.2	4.4
Furniture	1.5	1.1
Ready-Made Garments	9.0	19.1
Others	2.6	1.2

Source: Calculations using data from the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. 2015. *Labour Force Survey 2013.* Dhaka.

Given the evidently great demand for such training, it will be important for government institutions to focus carefully on practical applications of computing technology, for example, short courses with the needs of general administrative work in mind, and longer courses such as web design or network management.

Unfortunately, because the data available are broad, it is difficult to assess what computing skills the Bangladesh workforce is now acquiring. The degree of imbalance between the training acquired and the needs of the economy suggest that some of the training is intended more for personal use than for professional advancement. This is fine if such training is paid for entirely by private individuals. If the provider is receiving government subsidies, such training may be undesirable from a policy perspective.

After computing, training on agriculture is the second most common area of training, accounting for 10.9% of those trained. As the largest single sector in the economy, and one in which increased productivity will be critical to sustaining strong economic growth, it is appropriate that this should be a major area for training. Given the scale of the agricultural labor force, at more than 26 million, the annual volume of some 500,000 trainees appears modest and is unlikely to be consistent with rapid modernization of the agriculture sector.

The ready-made-garment sector is the third most common area of training, with 9% of total trainees, or more than 400,000 annually. This appears to be broadly consistent, in scale at least, with the needs of an industry employing about 4 million in Bangladesh. Of the trainees for this sector, 63% were women, consistent with the lower end of estimates of the proportion of women employed by the industry.

Substantial gaps exist between the areas of training being received and the areas of training desired. Computer training is the most desired area of study, as it is the most commonly received, but the proportion desiring such training is lower than the proportion receiving it, suggesting that the current training situation for computing skills may be reasonably adequate. By contrast, the proportion of workers wanting training in agriculture is substantially greater than the proportion receiving such training.

For lower-income families, forgone earnings are the most important barrier to pursuing either formal TVET or general education. One study focused on TVET found that those earning more than $2.00 a day took up formal, longer-duration TVET at almost twice the rate of those earning less than $1.00 day (CAMPE 2013). The same study found that students incur substantially greater cost to take up formal TVET programs than for general education.

In 2012, the National Skills Development Council secretariat, in cooperation with the International Labour Organization, published its National Strategy for Promotion of Gender Equality in TVET, partly in response to historically low rates of female participation in TVET. As of 2014, this had not succeeded in increasing the share of women in TVET programs, likely because of lags in policy implementation.

ACCESS TO TERTIARY EDUCATION

Unsurprisingly, Dhaka division has the largest share of workers with tertiary education at 8.1% (Table 5). The Sylhet division has the lowest share, at 3.7%. While these are very different figures, the huge difference by division in the share of workers with tertiary education versus those with the lowest education may not, without further information, necessarily mean a significant degree of difference in access to higher education by division. The observed patterns of location will also reflect demand for workers, so that those who have obtained education, in whatever location, may be more likely to locate in Dhaka for career reasons.

Table 5: Tertiary Education in the Labor Force, by Division (%)

Division	Labor Force Aged 15 or Above with Tertiary Education
Barisal	6.5
Chittagong	4.7
Dhaka	8.1
Khulna	6.0
Rajshahi	6.0
Rangpur	5.2
Sylhet	3.7

Source: Calculations using data from Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. 2015. *Labour Force Survey 2013*. Dhaka.

One study, however, reports that more than 60% of tertiary education seats are available in the urban or semi-urban regions, while more than 65% of the people live in rural areas (World Bank 2014). Most of the public universities are located in the divisional towns and in the metropolitan cities. The lack of local tertiary schools in rural areas is likely to be particularly restrictive for young women, as many rural families do not want to send their daughters so far away from home, even if the costs could feasibly be borne.

Consistent with the notable expansion of private universities, the number of individuals receiving higher education has increased rapidly, based on the labor force survey data. The gender parity ratio has also improved rapidly. The 20–24 age group is very close to complete gender parity, though this result is very much inconsistent with BANBEIS enrollment data.[1]

[1] The School-to-Work Transition Survey actually finds more women with higher education than men; see Toufique (2014), Table 3.2. It is unclear whether different sampling structures, different questions, or both, account for the difference.

Costs for tertiary education vary greatly, depending on the type of institution involved. Public universities in urban areas and public rural colleges charge the lowest costs (World Bank 2014). For such institutions, average costs, at least for tuition and fees, were below Tk10,000 annually. In some cases, tuition is nominal and, where not, substantial scholarships are available. However, the public universities are generally very competitive for admissions and are largely attended by those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. Most students come from the top quintile of the income distribution (World Bank 2014). Thus, the low tuition prices do not reflect a broad accessibility of these institutions.

The burgeoning private university system comes at a high financial cost to students. Tuition and fees are typically Tk40,000–Tk80,000, out of reach for many families. Student loans are available through some banks, but there is no system of government-provided loans or loan guarantees, making such loans relatively expensive.

Tuition and fees, however, are not the only costs students face in tertiary education. Many, likely most, tertiary school students pay for private tuition or coaching, on top of regular tuition fees. This pattern continues to be seen in lower levels of education. By 10th grade, more than 80% of students receive private tutoring (CAMPE 2008). There are many anecdotal reports of the instructors themselves engaging in private tutoring to compensate for low official salaries, even to the extent of neglecting their regular classroom duties. Some argue that tutoring is in fact the main learning modality in higher education in Bangladesh (World Bank 2014).

SKILLS MISMATCH

Toufique (2014) shows that as many as 62% of young workers may be undereducated for the work they do. The undereducated are concentrated in skilled agriculture and fishery work as well as craft and trade-related work. This suggests not so much a skills mismatch but a remaining lack of education among the youth, despite the tremendous progress that has been made in primary and secondary enrollment rates in recent decades.

The School-to-Work Transition Survey results show that undereducation rates are especially high among young managers (65%), young professionals (62%), and young technicians and associate professionals (92%), which mean that they had not received the level of education expected for their jobs. This may partly represent a middle-management gap that many sources have indicated as a problem in Bangladesh.

Unemployment rates are actually higher among people with higher levels of education, especially among youths (ADB 2016, Figure 2.2). While that might, in part, suggest that the particular education they have received does not match the demands of the current job market, questions asked in the School-to-Work Transition Survey suggest a more complex situation. Among unemployed youth, 62% cited lack of education as the main obstacle to employment, while only a tiny proportion cited lack of available jobs. Another 16% mentioned lack of training. Together, these facts suggest that neither the volume nor the nature of education and training are adequate to the demands of the job market.

Statistical evidence, although limited, indicates that the skills imparted by much of the TVET system are not those that the market requires. Unfortunately, this information is scanty because of the paucity of tracer studies. In one tracer study, 47% of graduates from formal TVET programs reported being unemployed when surveyed at least 2 years after their graduation (World Bank 2007). Most of the remainder was continuing their education, so that very few were actually employed. If these results are correct then it could be that TVET is not providing skills in demand, whether because of the quality of the education or the nature of the skills imparted.

Even in the informal sector, the lack of basic education and basic skills impedes expansion and movement up the value-added ladder. For example, the domestic bicycle market is largely served by very small shops providing relatively low-quality products. Typically, the workers have no formal training and are often illiterate. There will be at least one more skilled worker, who will pass on knowledge of basic production processes to other workers. While such traditional, small-scale production provides a substantial volume of employment, it cannot easily adapt to new technologies or move up to manufacturing the higher-quality parts needed for the international market. The local bicycle industry is only one example. The lack of basic education and skills are problems faced by many industries.

Naturally, specific industries also have specific skills needs, some of which have been described by Kathuria and Mezghenni (2016). In bicycle production, finding experienced welders is difficult, even though welders are paid substantially more than most other types of production workers. This seems to be exactly the sort of gap that should be filled relatively easily by the TVET system, but either because of lack of responsiveness or lack of information about market demands, it remains a significant constraint.

Skills gaps create one of the most important problems in the shipbuilding industry, which is a potentially large heavy industry. Many technical management positions are filled by foreign nationals or by citizens of Bangladesh who have been educated abroad. Relevant universities are aware of the issue and are attempting to improve education in the appropriate areas.

The pharmaceutical sector has been something of a success in Bangladesh, with the country now nearly self-sufficient in pharmaceutical products even though, as an export sector, its success has been more limited. The industry has the highest demand for managerial skills in Bangladesh. However, with the domestic market nearly served and exports currently limited, it is unclear if this industry will be a major source of demand for further managerial talent.

The IT sector is expanding rapidly and already employs more than 70,000 workers. Here again, one of the key complaints is not that particular technical skills are missing, but that the core educational competencies are not sufficiently strong in the workforce. IT firms in most countries assume that there will be substantial acquisition of specific skills on the job, or with firm-provided training. But workers need to have an adequate fundamental education to quickly acquire the needed skills. Many industry participants view this to be missing.

RETURNS TO EDUCATION

The returns to education are the extra income that accrues to workers with higher levels of education. It provides valuable information about the supply and demand patterns for skills and education. Returns to education are modest in Bangladesh, likely suggesting a combination of limited demand for current high-skilled jobs and relatively low quality of supply, at least in meeting employers' requirements.

As would be expected, each higher level of education results in higher monthly income (Table 6).[2] However, the scale is moderate. International estimates of returns to education produce substantially higher returns to education (ADB 2016). Individuals with tertiary degrees or diplomas report incomes that are a little more than double those of individuals with no education at all. Further, those with secondary education (Class VI–X) report only modestly higher income than those with only primary education.

Table 6: Employment Income and Returns to Education, 2013

Level	Monthly Employment Income (Tk)		
	Overall	Rural	Urban
None and Never Attended School	8,985	8,996	8,884
Primary (Class I–V)	10,550	10,202	11,243
Secondary (Class VI–X)	11,122	10,792	11,620
Higher Secondary (Class XI–XII)	13,469	12,770	14,195
Tertiary (All degrees or diplomas)	19,566	14,413	21,715

Source: Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. 2015. *Labour Force Survey 2013.* Dhaka.

Regression analysis can be used to evaluate the effects of education on labor earnings. Results of the regression analysis show that having achieved any level of primary education leads to a modest wage premium of 6%, but with a much higher return of 15% in urban areas.[3] Going beyond basic education to Class VI–VIII appears to add little private economic value, if any. For Class IX–X education, gains relative to some primary education for all of Bangladesh appear to be modest, but in urban areas there is no statistically significant additional premium. It is not clear that such modest increases in income are sufficient to provide adequate compensation for forgone incomes while attending high school.

The Secondary School Certificate (SSC) granted based on written examinations after the completion of Class X, marks completion of high school. For all of Bangladesh and for urban areas specifically, the income premium for those with the SSC certification is about 6% higher than for those who have only some Class IX and Class X education. However, relative to no education, the reward for completing the SSC is substantially higher in urban areas, at 25%, than it is in Bangladesh as a whole, where the average is 17%.

The Higher Secondary Certificate, the certification associated with completion of higher secondary school (classes XI and XII), has a significant return in higher earnings, with a larger effect of 7% compared with an SSC in urban areas. A bachelor's degree offers only a small premium of 3% over upper secondary education, while a master's degree leads to incomes about 9% above a bachelor's degree.

The returns to education found in the labor force survey (LFS) are very low by international standards. The present analysis only looks at increase in income associated with educational attainment; it does not take into account the potential income that is forgone by being in school rather than being employed, and even counting those costs, the return is modest. In developed countries, annual returns from education that are found in similar regressions are typically around 8%, while returns in poorer countries tend to be substantially higher.

As such, the returns to education estimated using LFS data are far below those in most comparable countries. If, however, the results estimated from the LFS are correct, then there appears to be an indication that Bangladesh's rapid increase in educational attainment has not been matched by job opportunities created by the economy.

QUALITY OF EDUCATION AND SKILLS TRAINING

Many industry participants have serious concerns about the basic level of education of their employees. There is substantial evidence that these concerns are not simply the griping of employers who would always be happy to have better workers. Only 25% of grade 5 students master Bangla, and only 33% master mathematics competencies (World Bank 2013). At the grade 8 level, competencies in Bangla, English, and mathematics are 44%, 44%,

[2] Monthly income is the standard measure of wage income in the Labor Force Survey (LFS) data. Although this could be converted to an hourly figure, errors in reported hours worked may lead to greater measurement error if income is expressed in hourly terms.

[3] See ADB (2016) for a more exhaustive discussion.

and 35%, respectively. There are substantial regional differences in educational performance. Students in Dhaka and Chittagong do better than the national average, but those in Rajshahi and Sylhet lag (World Bank 2013).

Many teachers do not have effective training and use rote-learning styles. Teachers are poorly motivated and teaching is seen as low status. While teachers are relatively well paid, the teaching profession has a low profile, and has limited opportunities for professional advancement, with little penalty for poor performance. Low motivation is evidenced by 10% teacher absenteeism, with a further group of more than 20% of teachers who arrive an average of half an hour late for school (CAMPE 2015). Further, many teachers engage in tutoring on the side, and may be more focused on that source of private income (CAMPE 2008).

There are still limited linkages between employers and most institutions that provide TVET. This has led to little responsiveness of TVET provision to job market demands—with no systematic feedback concerning industry requirements and no tracer studies of graduates, there is little scope for such responsiveness. The formal TVET track reaches a limited portion of the labor force because it requires grade 8 level, though recognition of prior learning is in the process of being adopted.

While curricula are centrally developed, there is limited capacity to provide regulation and inspection for accredited institutions to see that they are following the curriculums in any meaningful way. Of the more than 3,000 accredited private institutions, the Bangladesh Technical Education Board visited only 146, which was at the limit of its inspection staff (ADB 2015).

The capacity to train instructors is extremely limited, leaving many underqualified. At the same time, opportunities for in-service training are few, so that unqualified instructors are likely to remain so. Salaries are low, and many teaching positions are vacant—the vacancy rate for sanctioned positions may be as high as 50% (ADB 2015).

While TVET has expanded rapidly, there has been little assurance that greater learning has accompanied the greater number of seats. While many lofty goals have been set at a high level, those have not translated easily into improved educational outcomes. Further increasing the scale of TVET seems unwise at present until quality assurance can be improved. While some institutions and some public–private partnerships have been successful, there is limited evidence that a large proportion of the many students in TVET institutions are acquiring the skills that they need to succeed in a growing and diversifying economy.

CONCLUSION

The education and quality of Bangladesh's workforce needs to improve urgently, as huge numbers of young people are entering the job market just as the country is looking to diversify and modernize its economy. Clearly, the skills of the workforce are not meeting the demands of emerging or established industries. Many employers state that the difficulty of finding appropriately skilled workers is a substantial constraint to the growth of their firms. Private economic returns to education remain fairly modest, though this may be in part due to the huge expansion in the number of workers with at least basic education. As the economy grows and modernizes, the lifetime rewards to education will be likely significant.

While provision of basic general education has expanded greatly, areas and populations remain underserved, especially among the poorest. Efforts should be continued to bring all children into the educational system. Perhaps because of the rapid expansion of the general education system and because of a tradition of rote learning, average educational quality remains low and many students are not reaching achievement targets. Better enforcement of standards for teaching and a policy to discourage side employment of teachers, along with attempts to improve the status of teachers may help. A modernization of curricula to make them more flexible and relevant and less memorization focused will be helpful, along with potential de-emphasis of high-stakes testing.

Private tertiary institutions have proliferated extremely quickly, and it is not clear whether adequate quality standards are in place. High unemployment rates among young graduates suggest that the skills being obtained are not those required by the marketplace. A more careful program for oversight of such institutions may help to improve quality of education.

TVET is a key area of concern. Many of the rapidly developing countries and recently developed countries of Asia made TVET a central focus of their education systems as a way of preparing for rapid industrialization. In Bangladesh, formal TVET education makes up only a tiny portion of secondary education, and evidence suggests that some TVET resources are underutilized because of low demand from students. A unified and simplified system of TVET management and provision; promotional efforts to students and their families; and, perhaps most importantly, a continuous system of communication, coordination, and cooperation with private industry could help make TVET an important element of development.

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