

Employment – Youth Perception and Expectations

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic wreaked havoc on many people around the world, among them the youth section of the population. Even during normal times, the youth have problems finding and retaining employment. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated and entrenched this problem. As industries became quiescent and revenues were lost, many young people were laid off. This trend is reflected in Bhutan's national youth unemployment rates which grew dramatically to reach nearly 23 percent in the year 2020, from 12 percent in the previous year.¹

Emerging literature on the impact of COVID-19 on employment indicates a disproportionate effect on the youth, who are generally looking for their first jobs, have fewer assets to fall back on, and are working to further their future career prospects.² At the same time, research and study on youth inform us this group has a prominent role and impact on society.

A vibrant and hopeful youth population is an indicator of any healthy and thriving society. One conspicuous sign of an ailing society is its lacklustre investment in, and a general disregard for the youth population. This leads to disillusionment in the general population, as many no longer continue to believe that they can build viable lives in that society.

Disillusionment is always followed by crime and deviancy. Some theorists have explained the Arab Spring through this framework of disillusionment. The events of the Arab Spring movement, which was rife with chaos, was preceded by a high growth rate in the youth population (“youth bulge”) and a high unemployment rate.³ Youth discontentment in reaction to unfavourable socio-political conditions was growing. In countries such as

¹ Labour Force Survey Reports, National Statistics Bureau

² Churchill, “COVID-19 and the immediate impact on young people and employment in Australia: A gendered analysis.”; Lambovska, Sardinha and Belas, “Impact of COVID 19 Pandemic on the Youth Unemployment in the European Union”

³ LaGraffe, “The Youth Bulge in Egypt: An intersection of demographics, security and the Arab Spring”

Egypt, the growth in economic activity was unable to keep up with the demographic boom of college-educated young people. This specific group formed about a quarter of the total population before the movement.⁴ These young people were easily mobilised, mainly because the country had failed to keep them socially and economically engaged.

This became the breeding ground for one of the largest regime altering movements in modern history. The lesson here is that, for a society to succeed, young people need to believe that they have the means and opportunity to healthily participate in that society. Otherwise, the result is a disillusioned young population.

It is worrying that the general view of the youth population in Bhutan, pertaining to the job market, increasingly points towards a feeling of disillusionment and disempowerment. At the same time, there is hope and optimism present among the Bhutanese youth that the future will be better. For this to happen, there is the need to redesign our institutions so that they are tailored for the youth's needs and endeavours of the 21st century. This research piece is an attempt to highlight and explain the worries, concerns, and aspirations in a post-COVID Bhutanese job market from the perspective of the youth.

Methodology

The data for this research was gathered from 20 graduate students of the year 2021 from the Royal Thimphu College and the College of Natural Resources. Online surveys and in-depth qualitative semi-structured interviews were used for data collection. The research approach and design adopted was qualitatively-led mixed-method research. Quantitative questions helped gather numeric data, while qualitative questions helped achieve elaboration on responses. As for the sampling technique, the non-probability judgement sampling technique was used.

“Likely Employer”: Government Jobs Are Sought After Less Now

Youths do not view the government as their “likely employer”. Only four students out of the 20 who were interviewed chose the government sector

⁴ The median age in the nation was 24 years in 2011

when asked who they thought was likely to be their future employer. This is good news for those who have advocated for a small civil service, and for those who have pushed for a change in the age-old public mentality of viewing government jobs as the only source of employment. However, the reason for this might not be what many may expect. One primary reason many respondents shied away from government jobs was the higher competition and lower prospects of being recruited. This, many believe, has been exacerbated by the COVID pandemic.

This shift in view on jobs clearly does not stem from some entrepreneurial spirit we have been nurturing, nor is it an unnoticed side effect of national pedagogy, as many might hope. On the contrary, there is still the prevailing notion that the government has the primary responsibility of ensuring the availability of jobs. Nearly half of the students interviewed note that they are unsure about their future employer. The general sentiment of the respondents regarding employment reflects their disillusionment. A recent graduate from Royal Thimphu College notes:

I am unsure about who will be my employer. I wanted to join government service but looking at the tight recruitment of employees and high competition among the job seekers, it makes me feel I will not become a government servant. I am unsure if I want to do a job at a private place where my job will not have security and where firing is just as easy as hiring... I could see myself being self-employed only if I have capital and strong ties.

Another graduate echoes this sense of hopelessness:

Every individual wants to have a job after graduation but when jobs are limited and exams conducted are difficult, people would lose hope and even start to get depressed.

Further evidence of increasingly disillusioned youth emerges when questioned on their confidence about obtaining full-time employment. Half the respondents said that they were “not very confident” and “not at all confident”. Again, among others, the stiff competition was cited as a reason. But the phrase that was repeated numerous times was: “limited opportunity”. Many have this fear that they would be left behind, unable to keep up with the rising costs of living in fast-developing Bhutan.

However, it is not all doom and gloom. Despite the worsening conditions, there is hope that the future will improve. This shows in the fact that the majority of respondents still wish to work in the country. Another evidence of this was the strong sense of community that young job seekers displayed. Many students want, and still continue to aspire, for jobs that promote humanitarianism and the wellbeing of their communities. Jobs in areas such as healthcare, social work, law, education, and animal care were popular. This suggests that job seekers are driven more by a sense of community-belongingness than purely economic incentives.⁵ It is all the more important that the general youth attitude of the job market in Bhutan becomes a positive one.

Electronic Learning

The COVID-19 pandemic put to test the resilience of digital technology apparatuses around the world. Societies that had better trained or prepared staff performed better than their less-prepared counterparts when learning had to be moved online. Similarly, societies with proper infrastructure and hardware already in place had minimal trouble during the transition. Overall, the developed countries fared better than underdeveloped countries.⁶

The consternation stemming from e-learning presents us with logical solutions to many issues that plague the world. One such issue is climate change and the growing human carbon footprint. The dramatic reduction in the rate of vehicular emission, because of a massive reduction in movement, presents us with glimpses of possibilities that could solve challenges that seem conventionally insurmountable.

Such technology-driven innovation makes the case for itself. E-learning was one aspect of COVID-19 that could be salvaged as a positive development. But how do students around the world and Bhutanese view it? A recent study done on nursing students in Slovenia revealed that the students had an overall negative experience with e-learning.⁷

⁵ This paper is in no way stating or implying that economic/monetary incentives are unimportant

⁶ Zarei and Mohammadi, "Challenges of higher education related to e-learning in developing countries during COVID- 19 Spread: a review of the perspectives of students, instructors, policymakers and ICT experts"

⁷ Hvalič-Touzery and Lobe, "Attitudes towards e-learning among Slovenian nursing students: the case of the Faculty of Health Care Jesenice"

Even before COVID-19, there were many factors that determined the favourability and success of e-learning. Some factors put forth by previous research are student expectations⁸, control over the learning process⁹, computer literacy¹⁰, and students' backgrounds and personalities.¹¹

Therefore, owing to these complexities and nuances, this article does not comment on the overall effectiveness of e-learning in Bhutan because that question remains out of the scope of this research and, second, there is not enough evidence to definitively draw any conclusion on this topic. This portion of the research attempts to highlight the aggregates of positive and negative experiences students have had with e-learning.

Many respondents noted the positive aspects of e-learning that they experienced before graduation. Notably, e-learning seems to encourage more independent learning. Some students noted that the “condensed” lessons, combined with the availability of more free time, allowed them to explore content on their own. The students who disliked e-learning tend to converge on the discourse around the “digital divide”. So, common hindrances or challenges in learning were centred around issues of network or connection and affordability of Internet packages. This suggests that the digital divide and its effects will continue to persist in future e-learning courses if there are no actionable policies that address this issue.

Negative experiences with the Internet and e-learning hardware will only dissuade students from actively engaging with the novel platform. There is an increased risk of making students dislike e-learning, as Lin, Chen, and Fang (2011, p. 86) finds: “when a user has more negative experiences, he or she will have lower... satisfaction and attitude [towards e-learning].” When only a certain subsection of the youth can get decent connection and access to the Internet, lockdown mandates and the e-learning platform itself disproportionately works for the benefit of these students. And if one considers learning and education to be a determiner of one’s “chances in life”¹², then there is the imminent possibility of furthering inequalities through social design. Again, this leads to disillusionment.

⁸ Burton and Perkins, “Accounts of personal learning in primary care”

⁹ Duggan et al., “Measuring students’ attitudes toward educational use of the internet”

¹⁰ Selim, “E-learning critical success factors: an exploratory investigation of student perceptions”

¹¹ Docherty and Sandhu, “Student-perceived barriers and facilitators to e-learning in continuing professional development in primary care”

¹² Access to opportunities that furthers one’s social mobility in society

The Nobel Laureate, Joseph Stiglitz in his book *The Price of Inequality*, argues that systemic inequalities risk creating a disillusioned population that becomes increasingly distrustful of the institutions (elections, media, political system) of its society. Therefore, not only is the act of closing the digital divide a moral argument, but it is also a profoundly logical one, for the good of our society.

Job Readiness and Future-Proofing the Institutions

Only seven out of 20 students felt with certainty that they were job ready. The rest did not feel that their school education or degree had adequately prepared them for the job market. Here, what is interesting to note is that 16 out of the 20 interviewees sat for the PE (preliminary examinations) of the Royal Civil Service Commission's (RCSE) Civil Service Examination. Most of them possess degrees in Bachelor of Arts (BA) which places them in the "General" category of the examination. Most jobs under this category are non-technical (education and management). On this, a student who graduated with a BA degree in 2021, attests:

...[what] I studied is more aligned with/for the public sector. The public sector needs more of a management and administration type jobs to run the system. That is a key component or an asset. As for the other job listings, one certainly needs...hard skills or technical skills.

Another BA undergraduate who wants to become a civil servant, sat for PE examinations in 2021. She laments the poor availability of information on students' future careers:

After graduating, one thing I realised was that what I learned in school is rarely of use. I dropped math since high school, and it has been five years since. But the PE requires us to attempt 50 questions on problem-solving and data interpretation. I do not think the school did a great job in preparing us for the future. They should have at least told us about what lies ahead.

This shows that there is a lack of proper career counselling and assistance programmes in Bhutanese schools and higher learning institutions. Many graduates end up sitting for the Bhutan Civil Service Examination only to be dismayed by preliminary tests. Additionally, student respondents revealed

that the “experience-and-job” paradox is of concern. The experience-and-job paradox refers to the requiring of working experience to apply for jobs while it remains impossible to gain working experience without jobs in the first place. Several students alluded to this as an act of gatekeeping, which speaks volumes about the state of career counselling and assistance programmes in Bhutan.

Second, this could also possibly indicate that there is a disjunction between the education and training students receive and the kind of jobs that the Bhutanese labour market demands. In fact, almost all respondents reflected some level of dissatisfaction with the fact that the Bhutanese education system places too much emphasis on “book learning”. Instead, many asked for programmes that inculcate “practical skills”. By this, some were referring to promoting entrepreneurship or teaching soft skills, or even simply instilling a general love of learning by encouraging personalities and mindsets (“growth mindset”) that are in congruence with life-long learning.

Such shortcomings in our institutions present us with the opportunity to research and revamp existing curricula, especially the curricula of tertiary education degrees that are not tailored for the 21st century digital age. Basic courses in subjects such as data science, coding and mathematics seem necessary because the job markets of the 21st century will respond to these in one way or another. The digital revolution is ubiquitous and Bhutan cannot be the exception to the rule: We must adapt and progress or be left behind because of inaction.

In recent years, employers in Bhutan – both in the private and public sectors – have begun to conduct basic competency or aptitude tests to ensure that their applicants are qualified. Currently, aptitude tests are done in mathematics, data, and language. In the future, more elements such as coding and basic data science might also enter these aptitude tests, since these subjects will be an indispensable requirement in any organisation. The preparation for such a time should begin now so that it is not too late. Considering this impending reality, policymakers, educators, and other relevant stakeholders must show prudence and boldness in ensuring that our institutions remain ahead of the curve.

Conclusion

This paper attempted to investigate the general youth attitude on learning, career prospects and the overall Bhutanese labour market in general. The disillusionment or disempowerment framework best explains the general attitude of the youth towards the overall Bhutanese labour market. Conversely, as was demonstrated by a strong sense of community-belonging, youths still remain hopeful that conditions will improve for them in this country. Accordingly, all relevant stakeholders including, but not limited to, governments, educators and civil society organisations must undertake this social call to arms, and be the agents of bold and substantive change, as they have been throughout the history of this country.

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