

Can Soft Skills Promote Employment Outcomes for Graduates and Young Professionals in Bangladesh?



Bangladesh has a growing youth population, yet many young job seekers face challenges in securing formal employment due to a combination of employer- and worker-side factors such as a disconnect between graduates' skills and firms' needs that have led to a lack of jobs.¹ Although the education system often focuses on technical skills, employers now value both technical skills and soft skills, the latter of which are crucial not just for getting a job but also for succeeding in the workplace. Despite large investments into skills programs, the impact of soft skills training programs is mixed,² with some showing lasting benefits and others indicating temporary or varied effects.

Researchers partnered with IPA to evaluate the impact of CareerX, a soft skills training program for undergraduates, graduates, and young professionals, on employment and soft skills development.

Key Findings

- Participation in CareerX increased the likelihood of being in any employment by 4 percentage points compared to a mean employment rate of 62.6 percent among nonparticipating applicants.
- Despite targeting students in their second-to-last year, over two-thirds primarily identified as students in the second follow-up. COVID-19 and other political issues halted students' academic growth, and they could not complete graduation within the timeline. As a result, they did not meet the basic recruitment criteria of getting hired in full-time roles. Instead, the main area of employment was in part-time, low-paid tutoring.
- Students increased their soft skills on an index targeted by CareerX, with the strongest effects on decision-making, self-awareness, and listening.
- CareerX increased students' job preparedness but had no major impacts on how they searched for jobs.
- The effects of CareerX were strongest immediately (two months) after the training, but faded by the second follow-up as the comparison group caught up.
- Average attendance rates for students across all live sessions was around 60 percent. All positive effects of CareerX were magnified among students who regularly attended the live, instructor-led sessions.
- The hybrid (Zoom and in-person) mode of CareerX may be effective if attendance is prioritized. Overall, based on program costs and the impacts measured, CareerX cost USD 2.95 per participant and is one of the lowest-cost modes of such training programs found.



Recommendations

For Implementing Organizations: To scale a job readiness program effectively, it is crucial to monitor and maintain regular attendance and engagement during the training sessions as well as ensure continued communication with participants beyond the training to create job-matching opportunities with targeted employers.

For Policymakers: To reduce youth unemployment, a combination of technical and soft-skills are needed to enter in the labor market and retain good jobs. The government may consider updating curricula at the university level based on recent evaluations of programs, particularly those targeting the labor market for that age group.

For Researchers: Literature continues to show mixed effects of soft-skills training on actual employment outcomes due to i) time lag between the timing of the training and entry into the job market; and ii) scale of existing studies. Longer-term assessments conducted at scale are needed to provide more definitive results.

The Program

CareerX is a four-week training initiative developed by the Bangladesh Youth Leadership Center (BYLC) for undergraduates, graduates, and young professionals that focuses on enhancing socio-emotional skills associated with career development and employment outcomes. The program employs a low-cost “blended” approach combining instructor-led live sessions and self-paced learning modules that can accommodate various learning schedules. It covers four key themes: business communication, career readiness and planning, operations and management, and entrepreneurship. Participants dedicate approximately 23 hours to the live sessions and 6.5 hours to online modules, totaling nearly 30 hours of training.

In addition, CareerX provided light-touch job placement assistance, facilitating access to relevant job-related information through BYLC Facebook groups and weekly drop-in office hours for program alumni.

The Evaluation

In partnership with IPA, researchers conducted a randomized evaluation to assess the effectiveness of the CareerX program in enhancing soft skills among youth and whether this impacted employment, income, job search behavior, job market preparedness, and job-related expectations. Ultimately, researchers aimed to determine if, based on the program’s impact on these outcomes, scaling up similar programs in comparable contexts would be economically feasible.

The program sessions occurred in waves between September 2021 and November 2022. A total of 2,000 participants were randomly assigned to either register for the CareerX program or serve as a comparison group. Due to COVID-19 closures, 57 percent attended live Zoom sessions and 43 percent attended hybrid sessions, where at least one training was in person.

Researchers conducted three surveys to track participants’ progress: the initial survey before the program; the first follow-up about 2 months after participants completed the training; and a second follow-up between 6 and 18 months after completion.

Results and Conclusions

Employment: Participation in CareerX led to a small but statistically significant 4 percentage point increase in the likelihood of being employed two months after completing the program, relative to the comparison group average of 62.6 percent. This was driven by part-time employment in tutoring. However, the strength of the effects faded in the second follow-up. There were no effects on wages or hours worked in a typical week, which might have been due to the majority of students being employed in relatively low-wage, part-time teaching jobs.

Soft Skills: CareerX improved participants’ soft skills on an index of skills targeted by the program, with the strongest effects on decision-making, self-awareness, and listening. In the second follow-up, the trends in the effects remained, although less precisely measured.

Job Preparedness: CareerX increased job readiness in the short term, measured by indicators such as CV quality, ability to provide references, and establishment of a LinkedIn profile. Participants were around 7 percentage points more likely to have a LinkedIn account (from 60 percent to 67 percent), scored 55 percent higher on resume quality metrics relative to the comparison group, and were 9.6 percentage points more likely to revise their CVs (60.7 percent versus the comparison group mean of 51.5 percent). During the second follow-up, effects on CV quality were no longer significant while the effects on LinkedIn remained.

Job search efforts: CareerX had no effects on job search activities such as whether they looked for work, talked to friends and family about work, looked at formal sources, sent their CV, or interviewed for a job.

Attendance: Program attendance significantly influenced results. The average participant attended 60 percent of the live sessions. The short-term impacts of CareerX were the greatest among participants attending at least one live session.

Mode of delivery: Hybrid instruction led to better employment and wage outcomes than online-only sessions. For instance, hybrid classes increased any paid employment by 7.4 percentage points from a comparison group average of 53.4 percent. However, given that not only did the mode of delivery change after the pandemic, but so did economic conditions, social-connectedness, and other factors related to learning and job market conditions, it is difficult to determine whether the differences were due to COVID-19 or the mode of delivery.

Cost-effectiveness: Even with the limited impacts on earnings, the BYLC CareerX program could still make a very low-cost soft-skills training intervention cost-effective due to its impact on entry into the job market. The program was estimated to cost about USD 2.95 per participant due to its blended medium and is one of the lowest cost interventions found in the literature. The cost per additional participant in any employment was USD 47 and dropped to USD 37 when involving just those with regular attendance.

1. Thomas Reuters Foundation, “Lack of job growth for Bangladesh’s youth fuels campus protests.” Eco-Business, July 22, 2024

2. Kluge, Jochen, Susana Puerto, David Robalino, Jose M. Romero, Friederike Rother, Jonathan Stöterau, Felix Weidenkaff, and Marc Witte. “Do youth employment programs improve labor market outcomes? A quantitative review.” World Development 114 (2019): 237-253.

Writer: Michael Podesta | **Editing and Design:** Michael Podesta

Researchers: Mahreen Khan, Iman Sen

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Partners:

Bangladesh Youth Leadership Center (BYLC), IKEA Foundation

Study Type:

Randomized Evaluation (RCT)