Understanding Social Perceptions of Postsecondary Education and Training in Bhutan

Ryotaro Hayashi
Social Sector Economist
Human and Social Development Division
South Asia Department
Asian Development Bank

Kiyotaka Yageta
Assistant Professor of Economics
University of California, Berkeley

Norihiko Matsuda
Assistant Professor of Economics
Florida International University

INTRODUCTION

In 2020, Bhutan’s youth unemployment rate reached a record high of 22.6% as the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) spread. It remained high in 2021 (20.9%)—nearly double the pre-pandemic level. International travel restrictions and lockdowns hit the tourism and hospitality industry particularly hard, and many people were laid off. In 2022, with fewer job opportunities in Bhutan, many job seekers have become interested in exploring overseas employment and training, expecting higher earning potential.

In response, the Royal Government of Bhutan is providing a series of training courses through projects and programs such as the Skills Development Program, Skills Training and Education Pathways Upgradation Project, and De-suung training programs, despite increasingly tight fiscal space. The government has been working to expand technical...
and vocational education and training (TVET), which in 2018 had a share of around 7.5% of total enrollment in secondary education, as the gross secondary education enrollment rate reached 90%.\(^4\) Enrollment in TVET is considerably lower than government expectations, and there is a perception that TVET carries a poor image to attract youth.\(^5\) Members of society, including students and parents, could be underestimating the potential of TVET for career building.

Bhutanese policy makers have made efforts to address this poor image.\(^6\) In announcing the TVET reform strategic plan in July 2021, the government mentioned that TVET was a last option for many students, and argued it needed to be made more attractive.\(^7\) Also promising, employers may not stigmatize TVET as much as some observers think. An employer survey conducted in 2022 by the Ministry of Labour and Human Resources showed that employers see TVET graduates as equipped with skills and experience that are more relevant for jobs than bachelor’s degree holders.\(^8\) The current TVET course offerings, however, might not be attractive for youth. For example, while technical training institutes in Bhutan provide TVET courses on automobile repair and maintenance, electricity, and construction, these are not necessarily preferred industries for employment by job seekers,\(^9\) although these industries are facing shortages of skilled workforce.\(^10\)

This brief presents the first descriptive evidence of students’ and parents’ preferences for and perceptions of TVET and higher education (bachelor’s degree) in Bhutan. Understanding social misperceptions about postsecondary education and training paves the way for making more informed decisions on youth career development. It can also enable the government to create the right mix of interventions amid the tight fiscal space to help reduce youth unemployment in Bhutan.

### DATA

The Asian Development Bank (ADB), in close consultation with the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour and Human Resources in the Royal Government of Bhutan, conducted online surveys of grade 12 students and phone surveys of their parents in February 2021. The surveys covered 57 out of the 89 higher secondary schools (8,252 students and 3,887 parents) with a response rate of 81% for students and 82% for parents. This is good coverage although selected schools, students, and parents are not necessarily nationally representative. The survey was also conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic and respondents might have had atypically pessimistic employment prospects. These limitations call for caution in interpreting the survey data.

The survey focused on students’ and parents’ preferences and beliefs regarding TVET and higher education. Responses were grouped by education background and gender. The questions for both students and parents included their image or perception of postsecondary education and training such as TVET and higher education as well as their expectations of employment and salary level by age 30. These were compared with actual data from the Labour Force Survey in 2020, restricting the data to employed workforce aged 28–34.

### FINDINGS

#### Preferences for Technical and Vocational Education and Training and Higher Education

Only 19.2% of students and 11.8% of parents viewed TVET as a last resort (Table 1). Rather, 60.0% of students and 82.0% of parents saw TVET as an opportunity for obtaining employment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceptions of TVET</th>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Parent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“TVET is the last option to take”</td>
<td>19.2</td>
<td>11.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“TVET is a place for employment, but I don’t want to go to TVET”</td>
<td>20.8</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“TVET is a place for getting employment”</td>
<td>60.0</td>
<td>82.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TVET = technical and vocational education and training.

Note: These are three alternative TVET perceptions broadly recognized by developed countries such as Singapore, and respondents in Bhutan answer one of three response options that are closest to their perception. Number of respondents: students = 8,252; parents = 3,746.


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7 Stigma—a negative belief that associates with one’s actions, circumstances, and affiliations that a society or group of people have about something—is often observed in our life. People avoid stigmatized behavior, even though they do not have any strong opinions about it. Once some actions are stigmatized, it is difficult to improve the image of the actions immediately.
While TVET is widely considered as an avenue to employment, 20.8% of students and 6.2% of parents did not want to take up TVET courses.

Clearly, the majority of the students wish to pursue a bachelor’s degree. Figure 1 presents students’ preferences in higher education. Bachelor’s degrees in “Education” and in “Business, Management, Economics, and Law” are popular. About one-fourth of students ranked these two degrees as their first choice. TVET was the first choice for only 2.8% of students and the seventh choice for a plurality of students (45.9%).

Similar to Figure 1, Table 2 shows that both students and their parents highly ranked a bachelor’s degree in education. More than 75% of parents ranked majoring in education in the top three. However, the top three preferred choices of students provide a somewhat different picture. Although half of the students placed a bachelor’s degree in “Science, Math, Computer Science, and Agriculture” in the top three, less than one-third of parents did so. Around 17% of students and their parents ranked TVET in the top three, a significantly higher percentage than that for stopping education after high school. Similar patterns were observed when the data was disaggregated by gender as well as by location (urban vs. rural).

![Figure 1: Students’ Ranking of Preferences for Postsecondary Education, 2021 (%)](chart)


### Table 2: Top Three Choices of Students and Parents for Postsecondary Education, 2021 (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degree</th>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Parent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s (Education)</td>
<td>64.0</td>
<td>76.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s (Business, Management, Economics, and Law)</td>
<td>57.3</td>
<td>53.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s (Science, Math, Computer Science, Agriculture)</td>
<td>50.8</td>
<td>32.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s (Medicine, Nursing, other Health)</td>
<td>37.1</td>
<td>44.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s (Engineering)</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>36.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s (Arts, Humanities, and Social Studies)</td>
<td>35.3</td>
<td>33.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical degrees: Technical training institute or Institute of Zorig Chusum</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>17.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stop education after high school</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Number of respondents: students = 8,250; parents = 3,745.
Misperception of Technical and Vocational Education and Training and Higher Education

The survey collected perceptions of employment prospects following TVET and higher education. Specifically, the survey asked students and parents to predict employment rates and monthly salaries for those who complete grade 12, TVET, or higher education degrees.

Almost all students and parents underestimated the employment probabilities of grade 12, TVET, and bachelor’s degree holders.

Students and parents predicted lower employment rates than actual values (Figure 2). For example, while more than 90% of TVET graduates were employed at around age 30 years old according to the Labour Force Survey Report 2021, the average respondent expected only around 50% would get jobs. This figure is closer to the proportion of TVET graduates getting jobs soon after graduation—but more people are employed by age 30. Only 6% of students and 9% of parents overestimated the employment probability of TVET graduates. A similar trend is observed for graduates with a bachelor’s degree. As seen in Figure 3 and Figure 4, the proportion of TVET

Figure 2: Prediction of Students and Parents on Employment Rate of Workforce at Age 30 by Education Background vs. Actual Value, 2021 (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education Background</th>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Parent</th>
<th>Actual Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s degree graduate</td>
<td>87.8</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>81.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TVET graduate</td>
<td>92.5</td>
<td>45.0</td>
<td>87.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 12 graduate</td>
<td>81.5</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>87.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Figure 3: Employment of Men Aged 28–34, 2020 (%)

Bachelor’s (Science, Math, Computer Science, Agriculture) 56 13 20 92
Bachelor’s (Engineering) 87 5 95
Bachelor’s (Medicine, Health, and Nursing) 92 6 98
Bachelor’s (Education) 97 6 100
Bachelor’s (Business, Management, Economics, Law) 57 8 18 87
Bachelor’s (Arts, Humanities, Social Studies) 68 7 15 90
Technical Degrees from TTI or IZC 81 5 7 94
High School (Grade 12) 61 7 17 94

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graduates getting jobs is higher than the proportion of bachelor’s degree holders in general arts and social science getting jobs. For females, TVET graduates were the second highest after graduates of bachelor’s in Engineering in terms of proportion of people getting jobs (Figure 4).

Turning from employment to earnings, some students and parents had a drastic overestimation of the monthly salaries of the employed workforce after obtaining bachelor’s degrees. Figure 5 shows that the average monthly salary of university graduates is Nu25,800 (around $315), but more than 15% of the students expected above Nu40,000 (around $480). The average monthly salary for men with a bachelor’s in Engineering is Nu27,500 (around $350) as per Figure 6, but 75.5% of male students anticipated higher monthly salary levels. Similarly, according to Figure 7, the average monthly salary of women with a bachelor’s in Engineering is Nu28,400 (around $360), but 75.9% of parents of female students anticipated more.

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**Figure 4: Employment of Women Aged 28–34, 2020 (%)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education Background</th>
<th>Regular wage job</th>
<th>Casual wage job</th>
<th>Running business</th>
<th>Farming</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s (Science, Math, Computer Science, Agriculture)</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s (Engineering)</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s (Medicine, Health, and Nursing)</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s (Education)</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s (Business, Management, Economics, Law)</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s (Arts, Humanities, Social Studies)</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical Degrees from TTI or IZC</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School (Grade 12)</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


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**Figure 5: Prediction of Students and Parents on Monthly Salary of Workforce at Age 30 by Education Background vs. Actual Value, 2021 (%)**

Conversely, lesser students and parents had a drastic overestimation of the monthly salary of TVET or high school graduates. Unlike for bachelor’s degree graduates, not many students and parents expect more than Nu35,000 monthly salary for TVET graduates, i.e., the result is negligible. Overall, the monthly salary of TVET or bachelor’s degree graduates was slightly underestimated. Figure 5 shows that less than 50% of students and parents predicted higher monthly salaries compared to actual values. The only exception is male student perception of TVET graduates: 51.1% predicted higher than actual monthly salaries. This indicates a misperception, specifically, an underappreciation of potential earnings of TVET and high school graduates.

There is also a stark perception gap for female earnings. According to Figure 7, actual average monthly salaries of females do not change significantly among TVET graduates and university
graduates with bachelor’s degrees in “Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences” and “Business, Management, Economics, and Law”. However, female students underestimated TVET graduates’ earning potential relative to that of female university graduates. The perception gap among parents is even wider. While 69.8% of parents overestimated the monthly salary of female university arts graduates, only 31.2% of parents overpredicted the salary of female TVET graduates.

Parents had even more distorted perceptions of career prospects after TVET and stopping further education after secondary school. Even more than the students, they overestimated the earnings of bachelor’s degree holders, and underestimated the earnings of TVET and high school graduates.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This brief identifies three misperceptions about postsecondary education and training. First, some policy makers tend to think that TVET is stigmatized and is the last academic career option, but survey data shows that many students and their parents in Bhutan consider TVET as a valid choice for getting employment; however, it is true that majority of students and their parents prefer a bachelor’s degree over TVET. It is important for government to invest in TVET and ensure that it lives up to its perception as a route to employment. TVET course delivery and interventions need to be geared toward quality jobs by offering courses with high industry demand and that are commensurate with the high aspirations of the youth, especially since youth unemployment has remained elevated during and after the coronavirus disease or COVID-19 pandemic. Job seekers are also not so keen on working in the industry sector where many TVET courses are focused (e.g., transport and storage, automobile repair and maintenance, construction); hence, it is important to improve the image of these industries.

Second, students and parents underestimate labor market prospects for TVET graduates and overestimate those for bachelor’s degree holders. Their predictions on monthly salary of employed workers graduating from TVET are lower than the actual average monthly salary. They believe that graduating from university or college leads to more earnings compared to the actual average college graduate’s earnings. In particular, although female TVET graduates have at par or better employment and salary levels than female university students with arts and social science degrees, their perception of TVET is inaccurate and underestimated. School counselors in secondary education have an important role to play in correcting these misperceptions and promoting youth aspirations for TVET-related industries.

Third, labor market misperceptions were more pronounced among parents than students. Since parents’ opinions can be one of the most important factors determining children’s career paths, parental misperceptions may distort children’s choices. This calls for awareness-raising among parents as well as students in secondary school so that children can make informed decisions about their future career development. Beyond employment and salary, it will be important to include job satisfaction, working environments, and career possibilities so that parents and students have holistic ideas on labor market conditions. In addition to key statistics, sharing successful life stories of business leaders and entrepreneurs through social media platforms could be useful. These areas and the most effective ways to raise awareness in the context of Bhutan require further research.