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Evaluating Undergraduate Students' Employment Preferences: A Comparative Analysis of Salary, Work-Life Balance, and Organizational Sustainability

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Abstract- **Bangladeshi undergraduates' employment priorities have shifted markedly between 2010 and 2023. Using longitudinal survey data from over 75,000 final-year students at top universities, this study tracks trends in preferences for salary, work–life balance, and organizational sustainability. Descriptive statistics, time-series charts, and correlational/regression analyses are used to reveal these shifts. Results indicate a pronounced decline in the importance of salary and a dramatic rise in the emphasis on work–life balance, while interest in ethical or environmental factors remains minimal. Specifically, the share of students ranking salary as their top criterion fell from roughly 79% in 2010 to 33% in 2023, whereas the proportion prioritizing flexibility and life balance grew from about 12% to 58%. In contrast, preferences related to organizational sustainability hovered at only about 9–10% throughout this period. These trends align with motivation–hygiene theory and Maslow's hierarchy of needs, indicating that graduates are moving from extrinsic rewards toward intrinsic values and well-being. Correlation analysis uncovers an "ambition paradox": higher unemployment rates correlate strongly ($r \approx .90$) with factors such as intensive internship participation, high salary expectations, and desire for foreign jobs. Regression results show that moderate salary targets and clear sector preferences (government vs. private) predict lower unemployment risk, whereas internships alone did not guarantee employment. This implies that overly ambitious expectations may delay graduates' entry into the job market. Collectively, these findings suggest that contemporary Bangladeshi graduates now value work–life quality and purposeful employment more than before. This calls for universities, employers, and policymakers to adapt by integrating flexible work practices, mental-health support, and sustainability education into academic and workplace programs. Aligning training and recruitment with students' evolving values can help improve graduate employability and support Bangladesh's economic transition.**

Keywords- **Employment preferences, graduate expectations, higher education, job market trends, organizational sustainability, salary expectations, work-life balance, youth employment**

I.INTRODUCTION

The shift from university to the workplace has increasingly become intricate over the past decade due to new social norms, rapid technological advances, and global disruptors like the COVID pandemic. From a policy perspective, understanding the changing employability preferences of university graduates is important for strategic higher education planning, responsive labor markets, and policy frameworks. Youth employment and career choices incorporate economic factors alongside personal values, lifestyle goals, and perceptions of career longevity. With the increase in remote work, digital businesses, and ethical corporate branding, graduate students have begun prioritizing different factors when assessing prospective employers. Thus, employment opportunities for university students are no longer restricted to financial compensation alone. Contemporary graduates are increasingly influenced by work-life balance, ethics, organizational alignment, and personal growth. This has become more profound among Gen Z, who care less about traditional career yardsticks, and more about meaning, mobility, flexibility, and agile roles. Understanding this evolution helps reveal the alignment—or misalignment—between graduate aspirations and market trends.

Bangladesh exemplifies an interesting case for this transition. The future workforce of the country is disproportionately young, with a median population age of under 28 and currently over 4 million students enrolled in higher education. The competition that may still exist between these two sources of employment, the privately grown and government jobs is increasing as Bangladesh is constantly moving towards the mid-income states. Meanwhile, students receive more access to both social media, freelancing and digital nomadism. Such growth opens their eyes to a new perspective, where they could possibly start working in a foreign country or contribute to the culture of startups. Nevertheless, as the problem of graduate unemployment continues to be big, there is still a strong disconnect between the educational background needed and what is expected in the workplace.

The given research revolves around the main concern of graduates and those aspects that determine their choice of

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workplace: remuneration, work-life balance, and company sustainability. Although, pay is still extremely important, there is a drastic change to time freedom, psychological comfort, and morally upright employers. These aspects are consistent with the motivation-hygiene theory developed by Herzberg and these theories experience a distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation that refer to salary and work-life balance and meaningful work respectively [1]. On the contrary, the impacts of sustainability to the decisions that are made by the graduates in Bangladesh are unknown. Such dimensions are addressed in international studies on employment preferences of graduates [2], yet little is known about what impact they have in Bangladesh.

To study the employment preferences changes in the undergraduate students in Bangladesh between 2010 to 2023, this paper relies on over 10-year of data. The focus of the research will be specifically on answering the following questions:

1. To what extent have students' priorities evolved regarding salary, work-life balance, and sustainability?
2. What are the contemporary trends regarding sector preference (government, private, startup)?
3. What determinants are linked to the inactivity of employment among graduates?

II. OBJECTIVES

The study aims to:

1. longitudinal shifts in employment Examine priorities among Bangladeshi undergraduates from 2010 to 2023, specifically regarding the relative valuation of salary, work-life balance, and sustainability considerations.

2.Survey the contemporary sectoral inclinations of final-year undergraduates, distinguishing between government, private enterprise, startup, and international employment trajectories.

3.Elucidate the statistical associations linking graduate unemployment to variables including internship engagement, anticipated starting salary, and aspirations for international career placements.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent global research indicates a sharp global shift in what young graduates desire from their careers. In contrast to earlier generations, who placed a premium on the virtues of stable yet high-paying jobs, the members of Generation Z now seem to largely favor purpose-driven, flexible careers that align with their personal values. Studies conducted in Western economies like the U.S. and U.K. have shown that young employees are gravitating toward roles that afford them not only freedom but also digital privacy and social purpose—minus, perhaps, the sizeable checks one might expect from such roles [3]. This emerging trend seems to be gaining traction in Asia as well, especially in the fast-growing economies of India and Vietnam. A 2022 report from KPMG noted that students in India now seem far more interested in taking hybrid jobs that offer them a shot at creative expression and more personal time [5]. This is a clear departure from seeking traditional jobs within corporate hierarchies.

Yet, in developing countries, the picture is more complex. Although many students still primarily want high-paying jobs because of their pressing economic needs, globalization, digital media, and exposure to foreign academic contexts are impacting their aspirations. For one thing, according to the International Labor Organization (2022), even young jobseekers in low- and middle-income nations are increasingly considering factors like job satisfaction and remote work opportunities when making employment decisions [6]. Then, too, as the World Bank (2021) observes, our nascent and recent digital economies are giving rise to more freelancing, entrepreneurial, and otherwise self-directed careers [7].

This transition is gradually happening in Bangladesh. A study that the British Council conducted in 2019 regarding the youth of Bangladesh found that there was an increasing interest among them in pursuing jobs that would afford them global mobility, personal growth, and a decent work-life balance [8]. Yet this same study also flagged a major mismatch between the expectations of graduates and the actual job offerings available to them. The traditional, student-preferred, government-job, ecosystem is now countered by a rise in enthusiasm for startup ecosystems and international careers that are hard to find, and harder still to get, in an outmoded labor market. Meanwhile, the university curricula that might prepare students for those ecosystem jobs remain stuck in the past.

This study revolves around three central themes—salary, work-life balance, and sustainability. Salaries have been the historically prioritized factor, taking the lead, especially in countries where economic stability and security are uncertain. According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943), financial compensation gets to the most fundamental level of human motivation—the need for safety and survival [9]. But as we move along the staircase of human motivation, we see that salary is no longer glamorous and is no longer the motivating force it was at the basic level.

The balance between work and life, once viewed as a luxury, has become a necessity for many young professionals. Hofstede Insights (2020) contends that shifts in society and technological advancements have made time flexibility a more important aspect of job satisfaction than ever before [10]. Meanwhile, Clark (2001) considers the

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importance of pay to be as antiquated as it is when making a comparison with the importance of balance and very good mental health [11]. The reason, of course, is that well-being is now an aspect of job offers that young adults take very seriously. Sustainability, while increasingly critical in global hiring narratives, remains a less dominant factor in the Global South. Western studies have long shown that jobseekers are drawn to companies with strong ethical and environmental credentials [12]. But in Bangladesh, the integration of sustainability into employment decisions is still under-researched and appears underdeveloped. This gap is not just academic—it poses challenges for local firms trying to align with global ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) expectations. The lack of awareness of sustainability issues among new graduates will pose challenges to meeting the ethical expectations of global industry leaders.

To explore these evolving changes, this paper draws upon three fundamental work psychology theories. Both Maslow's theory and Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory (1959) offer relevant insights. While Herzberg's theory draws a distinction between hygiene factors (salary, job security) and motivators (advancement, recognition, and purpose), Maslow's Theory of Needs elucidates the hierarchy of needs, placing abstract goals like balance and fulfillment above basic needs.

The Youth Employment Trends of Bangladesh research has been concentrated around micro scale surveys. There is a significant gap in research that analyzes student preferences in a long-term framework across various university types and geographic areas. In addition, limited research has investigated work-life balance, salary, and sustainability as separate, yet interconnected factors of a career choice. This paper fills that void with a meticulous study of a longitudinal dataset that exceeds ten years in scope, with the intention of analyzing students' shifting preferences and their implications for higher education, policymaking, and prospective employment opportunities.

IV. METHODOLOGY

To analyze the development of undergraduate employment preferences in Bangladesh, this paper adopts a longitudinal descriptive research design using a pure secondary data approach. Since the purpose is to trace development over time, secondary data is the most precise and cost-effective part of analyzing the macro-trends in the priorities of the youth across different institutions and disciplines. The sets of data are based on nationally representative surveys on an international scale by established scholarly, state, and international institutions, carried out during 2010–2023.

The fundamental source of information becomes the Undergraduate Employment Preferences in Bangladesh Dataset, which refers to the answers given by more than 75,000 final-year students at 15 top public and privately funded universities. Among these are the University of Dhaka, BRAC University, BUET, North South University, as well as regional universities, which gives equal consideration to student opinion in all aspects of disciplines, regions, as well as institutions. The stratified random sampling method was used to conduct the surveys such that they adequately represented gender, academic backgrounds, and urban-rural demographics. Further information was sourced from longitudinal studies conducted by the World Bank STEP Skills Measurement Program, ILO School-to-Work Transition Surveys, and the labor market surveys of the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), University Grants Commission (UGC), and British Council. All the sources added special insights. An example is that the Higher Education Quality Enhancement Project (HEQEP) undertook tracer studies that reported the plans of the graduates in detail after graduating and their preferences in sectors. Studies conducted by the Bangladesh Association of Software and Information Services (BASIS) provided specific information on tech labor and entrepreneurship, whereas British Council reports investigated global mobility and cross-cultural desires [8]. With the data compiled on the background of multiple sources, the research develops a solid multidimensional vision of the changes in employment values during 13 years.

In order to guarantee the auditability of results over the years, a package of standardized variables is considered: salary expectations, work-life balance preference, and interest in organizational sustainability. Salary preference is the tendency to rank a high salary as one of the most important career criteria by the students. Work-life balance was measured by given responses of interest in flexible scheduling, mental health support, or personal time. Sustainability involved ethical work, CSR activities, and environmental awareness. Other variables included sector of choice (government, private, NGO, startup), expected first-month salary, willingness to work in a foreign country, entrepreneurial interest, and internships, which were also coded uniformly across data. Such definitions are correlated with the OECD and ILO frameworks to be internationally compatible and rigorous.

The analysis of the data was done in three steps. Initially, frequency (percentages) was involved in the descriptive statistics in capturing changes in employment values over the time periods, namely 2010, 2015, 2020, and 2023. It assisted in determining the main turning points, e.g., what preferences toward government jobs may change after COVID or what the boom in interest in entrepreneurship is. Second, time-series charts were performed to show the long-term trends through trend analyses of the 13-year data. When possible, percent change was found to determine how much increase or decrease of preference of students was. Lastly, correlational analysis, which majorly involved the use of the Pearson correlation coefficient, was employed in determining the strength of the relationships between key variables. As an example, the study asked whether the experience gained in internships was associated with greater

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employability, or whether students with international expectations were more inclined to appreciate sustainability.

Although the multi-year data is quite in-depth, there are still a couple of limitations. The year of the COVID-19 (2020–2021) reflected more urban institutions that had better digital infrastructures, and this could have created an underreporting effect against the voice of the rural population. Moreover, surveys overall failed to reflect the interest of informal sectors, e.g., freelancing or gig work, which have become increasingly important during the past five years. Changes in survey statements and response formats between years were also causes of variation that needed normalization, and this has been done by ensuring careful harmonization and recoding of variables.

Nevertheless, there are unique advantages of the secondary data approach notwithstanding these limitations. It allows determining generational tendencies and macro-level changes that could hardly have been determined with a single-time survey or through a fieldwork study of a small sample. It also gives ultimate external validity in that the data will be the representation of answers from a very broad range of institutions and geographic areas. Most importantly, this methodology allows researchers and practitioners to correspond student employment preferences to the wider policy discussions on graduate preparedness, university-employer collaboration, and youth employment options.

Through a longitudinal, data-based study based on validated survey tools, the study provides a stable platform through which the changing priorities of graduates can be interpreted and how better universities, governments, and interested employers can react to enhance responsiveness.

V. RESULTS

A. Descriptive Statistics

To examine the evolution of undergraduate employment preferences in Bangladesh from 2010 to 2023, descriptive statistics were used to report central tendencies (mean), variation (standard deviation), and range (min–max) for three key career priorities: salary, work-life balance, and organizational sustainability.

Variable	Mean (%)	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Prioritize Salary	56.44	15.69	32.7	78.5
Prioritize Work-Life Balance	34.11	15.66	12.3	58.3
Prioritize Sustainability	9.45	0.34	9.0	10.1

Predictor Variable	β (Std.)	t	p-value
Expected Starting Salary	-3.022	-10.389	< .001
Govt. Job Preference (%)	-4.659	-9.566	< .001
Internship Participation (%)	+3.368	+5.335	< .001
Private Sector Preference (%)	-4.200	-12.670	< .001

These figures demonstrate a significant referral change in the work ethic attitudes. In particular, the supremacy of salary to be ranked first has been worn out, and the importance of having work-life balance has increased dramatically. On the contrary, sustainability was not of great importance at any one time and showed very little difference over the years. These findings can be used to establish some tendencies of graduate career thinking and change of levels of values.

B. Correlation Analysis

To explore factors associated with graduate unemployment, Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated among four key variables: unemployment rate, internship participation, abroad job intention, and expected starting salary. This analysis assesses the strength and direction of linear relationships between these continuous variables.

Table 1: Pearson Correlation Matrix – Factors Influencing Graduate Unemployment (N = 14)

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Unemployment Rate (%)	1	.901**	.900**	.892**
2. Internship Participation (%)	.901**	1	.909**	.983**
3. Abroad Job Intention (%)	.900**	.909**	1	.963**
4. Expected Starting Salary (BDT)	.892**	.983**	.963**	1

Note: $p < .001$ (2-tailed) for all correlations.

All correlations were statistically significant at the 0.01 level, indicating strong positive associations between unemployment and each predictor. Specifically:

1. Internship participation and unemployment: $r = 0.901$, $p < .001$
2. Abroad job intention and unemployment: $r = 0.900$, $p < .001$
3. Expected salary and unemployment: $r = 0.892$, $p < .001$

This evidence implies that an increased rate of participation in an internship, international ambition and salary expectations are linked with high unemployment rates of graduates. In this case such a difference in graduate

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expectations and local labor market conditions may have contributed to underemployment or delay of joining the job market.

C. Regression Analysis

To further assess causal relationships, a multiple linear regression model was estimated with graduate unemployment rate (%) as the dependent variable. Independent variables included expected starting salary, government job preference, private sector preference, and internship participation.

Table 2: Regression Summary Table

All predictors were statistically significant at $p < .001$, confirming their strong association with graduate unemployment.

A more detailed model is shown below:

Variable	B (Unstd.)	Std. Error	β (Std.)	*t*	*p*
(Constant)	222.095	22.681	—	9.792	< .001
Expected Starting Salary	-0.001	0.000	-3.02	-10.3	< .001
Govt. Job Preference (%)	-2.486	0.260	-4.65	-9.56	< .001
Internship Participation (%)	1.573	0.295	3.368	5.335	< .001
Private Sector Preference (%)	-2.660	0.210	-4.20	-12.6	< .001

Interpretation:

1.The negative signs of the coefficients of expected salary, government job preference and preference towards the private sector mean that the greater the expectation level and job sector preference, the lesser is the rate of unemployment. It can be implied that those who have moderate expectations regarding their pay and have specific job interests will have a greater chance of succeeding in getting hired.

2.On the other hand, the positive coefficient of the internship participation (B = 1.573) is surprising and could be an indicator of the structural problems in the quality of internship and the subsequent employment ways. This may also indicate that the interned students might not ease easily into full-time jobs probably because of poor industry connection or poor placement.

The standardized beta values highlight the strongest predictors, with private sector preference (β = -4.200) and government job preference (β = -4.659) showing the most pronounced effects in reducing unemployment. Overall, regression model shows that clear job goals and realistic salary expectations are protective factors of unemployment, whereas it is not sufficient to participate in the internship to be employable, and this necessitates more effective systems of workplace learning and placement.

D. Graph Analysis

Figure 1. Trends in top employment preferences among Bangladeshi undergraduate students (2010–2023).

The graph displays the evolution of employment preference priorities among Bangladeshi final-year undergraduate students over the 13-year period from 2010 to 2023. It compares three priority types:

I. Prioritize Salary (Blue Line)
II. Prioritize Work-Life Balance (Red Line)
III. Prioritize Organizational Sustainability (Purple Line)

The Y-axis shows the mean percentage of students ranking each priority as their most important career preference, and the X-axis represents the years from 2010 to 2023.

The difference between employment preferences made by final-year undergraduates in 2010 and 2023 demonstrates that there is a drastic generational change in the values of career. The aspect of salary, which was the most influential impetus, has dropped drastically over the past, falling by 58% to 33% in 2023, suggesting that people are no longer driven purely by financial gains. On the contrary, work-life-balance preference boomed to an unprecedented 58% (up 374%). It parallels the increasing significance of flexibility, workplace-related mental health, and self-determination, which has been accentuated by the COVID-19 pandemic and changing work culture. Meanwhile, organizational sustainability was nearly at the same degree, roughly 9-10%, implying that students have little awareness or are less concerned with ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) factors. Such stagnation represents a lack of a policy and education, such that sustainability is perceived as inapplicable to the local employability. Taken together, these trends signify a more general shift in extrinsic to intrinsic career motivation, as the quality of life has replaced income as an axis of focus, whereas sustainability still represents an overlooked concern in the career-related desires of Bangladeshi graduates.

V. DISCUSSION

This longitudinal analysis shows that there has been a paradigm shift in what Bangladeshi undergraduates value in employment between 2010 and 2023. The most significant of these is the decline in the relevance of salary as the primary employment concern, which is accompanied by the considerable increase in the value placed on work-life balance. It denotes a more general generational reordering of value assessments in career outcomes, shifting from extrinsic drivers of value, like financial reward, to more intrinsic drivers of value, like mental health, freedom, and quality of life. The findings align with the Motivation-Hygiene Theory, put forth by Herzberg in 1959, which posits that although hygiene factors such as salary prevent dissatisfaction, intrinsic factors that motivate satisfaction include recognition, growth, and work-life balance.

The observation that in a developing economy like Bangladesh, the focus placed on attaining work-life balance by graduates has surged by 374% over the span of 13 years,

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serves as evidence that global workplace trends such as remote work and flexible working hours have permeated the career aspirations of students in developing countries. Such change was particularly accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which redefined norms regarding work time, mental health, and employer support systems. These findings contribute to the increased cultural viability of non-standard employment metrics and support international reports, including the Global Gen Z Survey released by Deloitte (2023), which identified balance and purpose as the top drivers of career choice among young people globally [4].

By comparison, organizational sustainability has remained a low priority, and student interest has not changed significantly over time. Although Western literature (Greening & Turban, 2000; Smith & Nguyen, 2020) emphasizes the growing weight of Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) considerations in career choices, this study shows that Bangladeshi graduates are not highly engaged with sustainability issues in the workplace. This disparity can be explained by the limited curricular emphasis on sustainability, insufficient employer communication regarding CSR initiatives, or the overriding importance of financial and job stability concerns in a developing economy. Sustainability as an employment factor is therefore an underdeveloped domain, and targeted educational and policy measures are needed to raise awareness and bridge this gap.

The correlation and regression analyses provide deeper insights into the complexities of graduate unemployment. Strong positive relationships among internship participation, desire to work abroad, expected salary levels, and unemployment rates indicate that excessive exposure to global prospects or high ambition levels may paradoxically correlate with increased difficulty in obtaining domestic employment. This discovery calls for deeper scrutiny. One possible explanation is that exceptionally ambitious graduates are increasingly reluctant to take on low-paying or entry-level positions, leading to prolonged periods of unemployment or underemployment. It is also possible that the internships offered in Bangladesh are not sufficiently designed to provide pathways to employment, suggesting that work-integrated learning, as well as the linkages between industry and academia, are not well conceived or strategically structured.

In addition, the regression analysis shows that realistic salary expectations and sectoral clarity (preference for either government or private sector) are protective factors against unemployment. This implies that graduates with realistic attitudes toward wages, who enter the labor market with specific sectoral interests, are more likely to find employment.

The positive correlation between participation in internships and unemployment rates casts doubt on the efficacy of internships as a bridge to employment. It suggests possible systemic inefficiencies in the translation of internships into full-time employment, and/or a disconnect between the reality of graduate internships and the expectations of graduates, which may cause dissatisfaction and delay their entry into the job market.

VII. CONCLUSION

This study presents strong arguments to the effect that there has been a tremendous shift in the employment patterns of Bangladeshi undergraduates since 2010 and 2023. The single most dramatic change is a loss in prominence of salary as prime job selection factor and a dramatic increase in place of work life balance in central issues. This development supports the Motivation Hygiene Theory as defined by Herzberg, which is the fact that graduates are more interested in intrinsic satisfiers, i.e., autonomy, mental well-being, and meaningful work instead of the traditional extrinsic awards. In contrast, organizational sustainability is an area that has been significantly underemphasized and shows a particularly significant disconnect between ESG discussions around the globe and local graduate demands.

Correlation and regression studies also help in clarification of the intricate relationship that surrounds graduate unemployment. Although sensible wage requirements and definite sectoral interests (government and non-public) only turn into protective variables against liability to unemployment, excessively high expectations, characterized by the desire to work abroad and attend internships, ironically is related to the long periods of unemployment. This so-called paradox of ambition brings about several systemic gaps in quality and conversion of internship experiences and requires the increase of industry academic collaborations that have been strategically designed. Collectively, these results have great implications on higher education institutions, employers, and policymakers. The universities ought to incorporate soft skill education development, learning at workplaces and sustainability literacy into their curricular to curtail the gap between the competencies of graduates and the trends of the market. Employers need to provide flexible working environments, psychological assistance, and clear social enterprise activities to appeal to the modern graduate ethics The policy makers must encourage employer university collaborations and make compulsory standards of internship programs to make them work as real employment avenues. Despite its strengths, which lies in the size and the national representativeness of a longitudinal data, this study has several limitations. It is based on self-reported survey data that might be prone to response biases and fails to identify preferences of the informal sector and the gig economy. In future studies, mixed method designs ought to be used to determine the qualitative foundations behind graduates in decision making, and their analyses should be increased to new forms of work like platform-based freelancing.

With the help of throwing light to the changing landscape of graduate priorities and their labor market implications, the present research establishes a framework through which evidence-based interventions can be achieved towards helping the graduates of Bangladesh to become more

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employable, to achieve sustainable organizational practices, and to help Bangladesh to become a more resilient and human centered economy.

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