

# Tertiary education during Covid-19 and beyond



September if the situation does not improve. The impact of this interruption in scholarly routine will be deeper and beyond the duration of the pandemic. A challenge is to keep students engaged in some form of learning during the prolonged closure. Can these educated young people also join in their own communities' crisis survival response? And what might the "new normal" be as the crisis abates?

The University Grants Commission (UGC) is upset that some private universities, with the cessation of classes, decided to assess their students' semester performance based on mid-term exams and classwork without a final exam. The UGC also rejected some of the universities' plan to admit students for the next term based on their HSC and SSC results. It seems some formalities and rules are sacrosanct, irrespective of the circumstances. But then, this is selective. There are other areas where rules might be better applied stringently by UGC, such as, requiring adequate education technology provisions and applying accreditation rules to maintain academic standards.

The public universities performed their duty by shuttering the residential halls on March 24. The students were forced to leave campus—a move that scattered them to all parts of the country. There was generally no advice or words of commiseration about how the students might cope with the academic and personal situation in the crisis; if they might be in communication with their departments and teachers; and whether in their respective communities, individually or collectively, they could be engaged in community support work during the crisis.

The 46 public universities, with an enrolment of some 600,000 students, have not offered online or other forms of distance education, with the sole exception of Shahjalal University of Science and Technology (SUST) in Sylhet, as *The Daily Star*

reported on April 23. The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics' Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2019 found 37.6 percent of households in the country have some access to the internet by any device and only 5.6 percent have a computer or tablet. Half of the homes had a TV. Most universities and colleges are also not equipped with the hardware and connectivity to offer lessons online.

Only about a dozen out of a total of around 90 functioning private universities have made an effort to offer online instructions during the forced closure. These

learning the longer term lessons for tertiary education.

In terms of coping with academic disruption, we need to acknowledge that the online mode of teaching-learning is not developed enough and extensive enough to serve as a significant substitute or complement to physical classes. But whatever can be done and has already been initiated should continue to keep at least some of the students engaged in some learning activities. Private universities need to complete their current semester using their best judgment



The UGC rejected some universities' plan to admit students for the next term based on their HSC and SSC results.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

few have taken a tech-based approach to conduct online classes through platforms like Google Meet, Zoom or Discord. Many students, however, are not exactly thrilled about their online experience. Lack of a stable internet connection is a frequent problem. Students find it difficult to follow the lessons because the network breaks down and power goes out, more often in the rural areas.

What is to be done now? Three sets of actions are called for—managing the academic disruption, ensuring students' wellbeing and their engagement in community response to the crisis, and

about engaging students in online activities, asking for written assignments, or holding exams when students return. They should assess their students' work, ensuring that students perceive the process as fair. It is not particularly useful for UGC to be sanctimonious about these details, which are in any case the responsibility of the respective universities under law. The same applies regarding selection of their students for the next semester.

Both public and private universities need to plan for making up lost time and make at least a two-year plan to curtail holidays,

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hold extra classes and work with students so that delays and session jams are averted. The affiliated colleges, where three-quarters of tertiary students are enrolled, also need to make similar plans guided by the National University.

Regarding student wellbeing and community engagement—why shouldn't the college and university students scattered across the country be actively engaged in their own community's survival struggle during the pandemic? The community work can be organised at the union and ward level in villages and municipalities/city corporations, led by local government bodies jointly with NGOs and community organisations. The student volunteers can assist in making lists of the indigent families, deliver food and cash, and help in awareness raising on safety and protection. It should be voluntary for the students, but they need to be inspired to join through a motivational campaign, nationally and locally. A cash allowance should be offered, which would also be a way of transferring some cash to the young people and their families, many of whom are in poverty. Such a programme will be good for mental health and boost the self-esteem of the participants.

The secondary and higher education authorities have asked heads of institutions and officials to organise students and teachers to assist in boro crop harvesting, which accounts for half of the annual rice production of the country. It is at risk of being partially lost, because the regular seasonal farm workers cannot travel from other districts due to movement restrictions. Again, planning and organising at the local level will be critical, but this is also a good way for students to support the local community.

Is it not possible for each of some 120 universities and over 4000 colleges to adopt

at least one locality in their own vicinity and assist in its struggle for survival during the crisis? Students and teachers could assess needs, identify the needy, mobilise resources, plan necessary action, and assist and support the community. Some student groups are carrying out similar activities sporadically. Such activities should be planned in coordination with the local administration.

The lesson from international experience about defeating the pandemic is to implement a regime of large scale testing, tracing and isolation throughout the country. Indian epidemiologists predict that lockdown in parts of the country and the testing-tracing-isolation-treatment routine have to continue for months to avoid overwhelming the weak health care system. Thousands of tracers will be needed if such an approach is adopted. College and university students, including medical students, can be quickly trained and supported with protective gears in order to act as the tracers in each union and ward, working under required protocol.

The Covid-19 crisis has laid bare the inadequacies of tech-based learning capacity and the serious digital divide in the country. A major programme for building up education technology capacities in the higher education system should be a priority of UGC, universities and the government. Why can't every institution be a free and high-capacity wi-fi "hotspot"? The telecommunication regulatory body (BTRC), mobile phone companies and the large tech companies can surely make this happen. Online course materials, greater interactivity, and learning portals and platforms should be the regular features in every institution of higher learning.

Every college and university can have laboratory locations in specific communities where students and teachers engage in research and study, and assist the community to develop itself. This need not be only an emergency response. Can this not be a great opportunity for students and their teachers of knowing society and communities, and knowing themselves—their own strengths and ways of overcoming their vulnerabilities?

The "new normal" after the pandemic should not be a return to the not so great "business as usual".

Dr Manzoor Ahmed is professor emeritus at Brac University. The views expressed are his own.

# Rollback the distrust, remember the core values

Societal relations are fragile and need constant nursing; social peace is a prerequisite for progress



and downright hatred by a section of our people against another. Are these expressive of atavistic impulses of yore or generated by more recent trends seeking social hegemony premised on an imaginary past?

## Foundational values

The basic values of India's Constitution assert the principles of justice, equality and fraternity and are reiterated by all sections of social and political leadership. Yet, those who profess to be their followers tend to forget them time and again.

We have in recent weeks witnessed social debates and contestations, normal in a democracy, derail into aggressive assertions that typecast fellow citizens as enemies or undesirable creatures. The trend even finds its reflection in pronouncements of public figures and officials. Both have been prone to forget that even if a citizen is charged with an offence against the law or found to be guilty of it by the due process of law, he or

she does not cease to be a citizen and stands deprived of rights and duties of citizenship. The conclusion is inescapable that the sole purpose of such typecasting is to find an excuse for an administrative failure and instead cast a slur, stigmatise and socially degrade a group of fellow citizens.

The trend is so pervasive that it finds expression in sections of our citizens living in foreign lands; it is so aggressive that it offends local sentiments and norms of behaviour; so alarming that it has invited reaction from otherwise friendly local hosts and compelled our authorities, belatedly, to state the official position at the highest level.

This ailment of the mind is being reflected in the discharge of normal duties by officials at different levels and is alarming enough to induce a group of 100 of our most eminent former civil servants to appeal, recently, to State Chief Ministers "to instruct all public functionaries to be particularly vigilant to prevent social boycott of any community in the State and to ensure that all the entitlements including medical and hospital care, rations and financial assistance are available equally to all those in need".

Why is this happening? What have we forgotten or disowned?

The plurality of our society and its diversity is an existential reality. The imperative of coexistence and tolerance has been accepted down the ages. Sages and society leaders have reiterated it time and again. We need only



PHOTO: COLLECTED

to recall Swami Vivekananda's advocacy of religious pluralism, to his vision of India "being the junction of two great systems—Hinduism and Islam—having a Vedantic brain and Islamic body".

## Approach worth reiterating

This same approach in a more practical

sense was reflected in the Inter-communal Unity Appeal made in October 1923 by a group of Indians led by Lala Lajpat Rai, Mufi Kifayatullah, Swami Shradhdhanand, Maulana Azad, Kasturba Gandhi and 95 others. All sections of our public need to be reminded of its pragmatic approach: "If any individual or group of individuals belonging

to any community commits an act of violence against, or attacks the person, property or honour of women or places of worship (mandir, mosque, church or gurdwara, etc) of his neighbour or townsman or helps those who indulge in such misdeeds, he is, from the religious point of view, guilty of a great sin; and that it is the duty of co-religionists of such offenders to stand up and resist such miscreants and to protect those who are so attacked."

Why can we not show the mirror in this shape to our professedly religion-minded public and urge it to follow in word and deed? The present approach of distrust is disquieting, resulting in resentment, and injection of suspicion and viciousness in social relations. It impacts adversely on the promotion of fraternity. Is it serving any purpose, either of fighting the pandemic or of expediting the process of proceeding against those who may have transgressed the law? Alternatively, is it serving a political purpose?

History tells us that human relationships are fragile and need constant nursing; the same holds for societal relations. We have in our own times witnessed the fragmentation, even destruction, of societies elsewhere. Social peace is thus a pre-requisite for progress and development. Let sanity prevail. Let this be our motto.

Hamid Ansari is Former Vice President of India (2007-2017). This article was first published in The Hindu on April 27, 2020.

**HERMAN MELVILLE**  
(1819-1891)  
American novelist, short-story writer, and poet.

*To know how to grow old is the master work of wisdom, and one of the most difficult chapters in the great art of living.*

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

**ACROSS**

1 "The Bourne Identity" star

6 Sound from an angry cat

10 Wear away

11 Puccini opera

12 Writer Carr

13 TV's DeGeneres

14 Sacred bird of Egypt

15 Gizmo protector

16 Game cube

17 Summit

18 Galleon setting

19 Spring celebration

22 Close by

23 Bring up

26 Annual celebration

29 Motorist's buy

32 Place down

33 Compete

34 Profane

36 Andean capital

37 Trap

38 Derby prize

39 Oven feature

40 Deal maker

41 Spots

42 Two score

**DOWN**

1 Act the judge

2 Speedy horse

3 "Tartuffe" writer

4 Keats poems

5 S. Dak. neighbor

6 Lester of NBC News

7 Resport spots

8 Play part

9 Annual visitor

11 Afternoon social

15 Peas' place

17 Michael Jackson hit

20 Keyboard key

21 Casual assent

24 Presidential aide

25 Clothes

27 Bright beam

28 Like some breads

29 Strong winds

30 "Tomorrow" musical

31 Ignominy

35 Refinery rocks

36 Company symbol

38 Brit. fliers

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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