

Alternatives

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Cramming Kills Creativity

From the *Alternatives* Desk

OUR education is sucked into a tradition long organized by Macaulay and his colonial peers. As Macaulay had put it sometime in 1835, the British education policy in India was designed to create "a class who would be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern, a class of persons Indian in blood and color, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and intellect." Consequently, in less than a hundred years or so, the task of the government in educating the governed was radically transformed, with critical long-term consequences. In fact, the education provided under the British had two critical features. Firstly, a greater emphasis was given to the study of law, languages and humanities compared to engineering and medical sciences. Secondly, with the introduction of English as a medium of instruction, most of the students settled for the habit of cramming the text in order to pass, what again turned out to be an excessive number of examinations. Both features amply demonstrated the fact that Macaulay's intention of producing a class of 'interpreters' and not *innovators* were carried out in words and deeds.

Interestingly, by the second half of the 19th century, the colonized educated class (referred variously as *Babus*, *Bhadraloks* or *Bhadrants*) became instrumental in influencing and reproducing the very colonial education policy of which they were the first products. And it is this factor of colonized institutions reproducing colonized minds that continues to haunt us all, indeed, effectively organizing and reproducing the education policy of post-colonial Bangladesh.

There are several reasons for the tradition of cramming to continue even today. I will, however, limit myself to four:

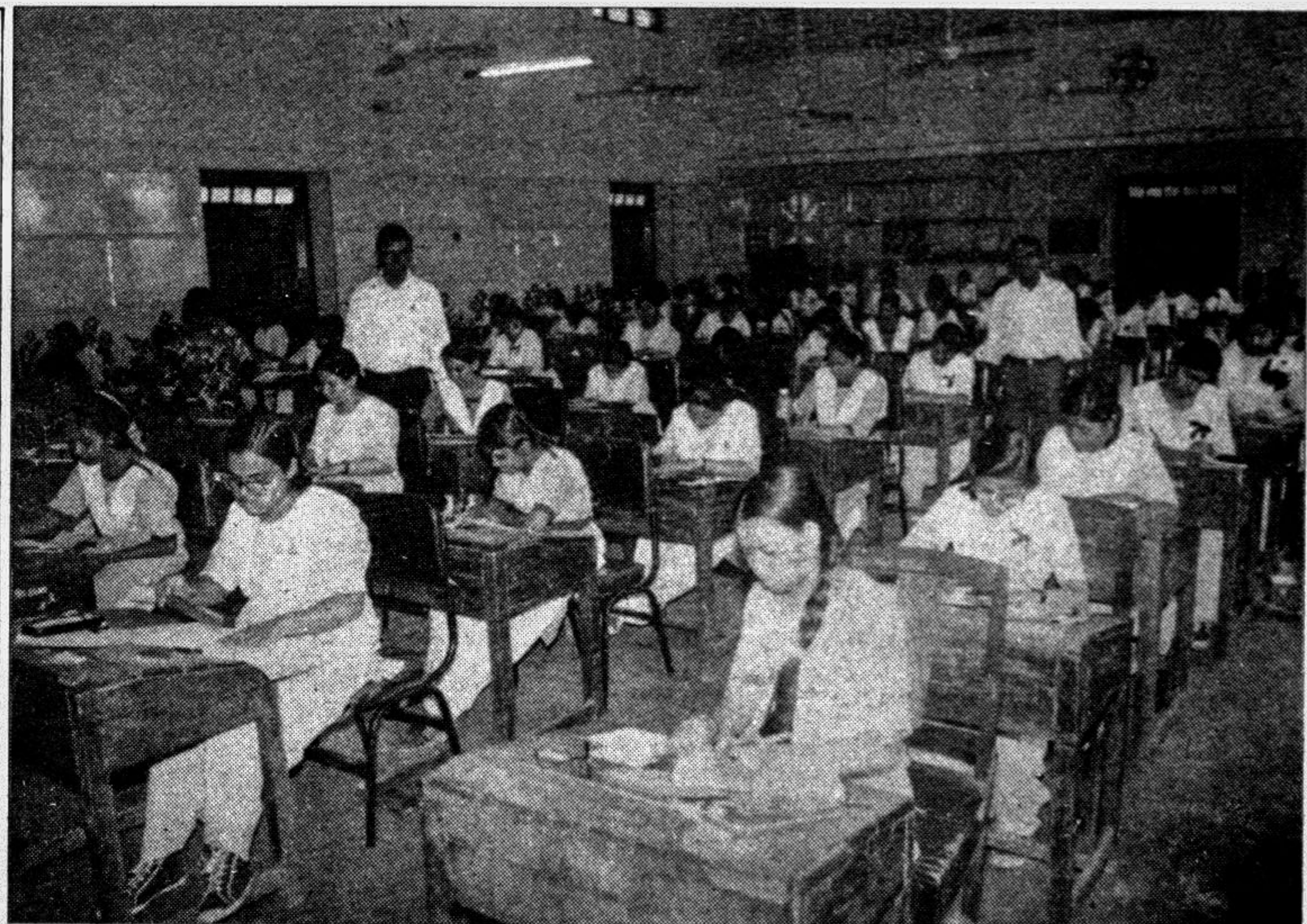
One, lack of creative development of the Bengali language. It still remains divided along class lines and the use of archaic grammar has killed the spontaneous and progressive development of the language. Bangla Academy has miserably failed in this endeavour.

Two, the fuss with the English language, the incapacity to treat the language as a South Asian language. In this context, I would like to mention two things. Rabindranath Tagore received the Nobel Prize, as the Nobel Committee had put it, for his "contribution to the literature of the West." And there is no reason to think that other Bengalis cannot do likewise. Secondly, the official language of SAARC (incidentally the brainchild of Bangladesh) is English. And as such English becomes one of the languages of Bangladesh.

Three, the curricula of our schools, colleges and Universities are all catered to champion the cause of Western wisdom and practices. In fact, they have little relevance to the people and places of this country.

Last but not the least, there is hardly any emphasis on creative writings and outdoor activities in our education. Consequently, education becomes a process of note gathering, note cramming and sit down exams, killing thereby the creativity of the students.

The times evidently have come for redesigning the *design* of Macaulay and free our education from coloniality and cramming. Let creativity and imagination flow....



Examination in progress at a city school.

— Star photo

Curing the Public Examinations

by Nirupoma Chowdhury

JARINA Begum, who is a domestic worker, was widowed five years back. Since then she has been working hard for her only son. If she is asked about her hardships, she will answer you with a smile that her agonies and sorrows will go away when her son passes his Matric and then JA. Jarina is not the only mother whose dreams are surrounded with her son's passing Matric and JA; there are thousands of mothers in our country who are dreaming about their off springs, in spite of several hardships they face.

Previously known as *Matric* and *JA* are now recognised as the Secondary School Certificate Examination (or SSC) and the Higher Secondary Certificate Examination (or HSC). These are the two biggest public examinations of our country. Every year about a million of students appear in SSC and HSC examinations.

Our Secondary and Higher Secondary Education System

In our country a common view on examination is that it is separate from teaching and learning, both theoretically and in practice. According to this view, a test is a necessary but unpleasant imposition. But actually testing and teaching are closely interrelated. The SSC examination is the first biggest test the students face after their ten years of schooling. As our secondary and higher secondary education system is divided into ten plus two years system, so our students appear in the first public examination after completion of ten years of

secondary education and they face the second public examination after the two years of higher secondary education. There are five education boards in our country. These are Dhaka, Chittagong, Comilla, Jessore and Rajshahi. Under these five education boards these public examinations are held.

Syllabus and Curriculum

The questions of the SSC examination are set up according to the syllabus taught in class nine and ten. Students can choose any one group from three different streams – science, humanities and commerce. On the other hand, questions appear in the HSC examination after studying the syllabus taught in class eleven and twelve. In this level also students can choose any one group from the three streams. Students who passed the SSC having science can change the stream, but students having humanities or commerce cannot migrate into the science stream. However they can interchange within humanities and commerce. Syllabus plays a very important role in the testing process as the questions of the examination are absolutely depended on the ascertained syllabus. All the students with whom I talked about the examination system, mentioned about the syllabus and curriculum. Most of the students are not satisfied with the present syllabus. They mentioned that most of the topics, which they are studying, are not sufficient for the practical life. Besides, these are not prop-

erly designed. So they face difficulties in their professional life, as they cannot properly implement those knowledge. Chairman of the Secondary and Higher Secondary Education Board, Dhaka Dr. A. T. M. Sharifullah talked about the deficiency of the syllabus and curriculum designed for the SSC and the HSC level. He mentioned that these deficiencies are the reasons, which make our students unskilled and inefficient even after completing ten or twelve years of studying. He also added a very important thing. He said that as a nation we are losing our morality, our humanity; we are deteriorating day by day. He stressed on including the moral education as a compulsory subject in the secondary and the higher secondary education. Dr. Sharifullah added that the Secondary and Higher Secondary students should be taught about humanity and moralism. This kind of education will help the students to keep away from adopting unfair means in all spheres of lives.

Teachers
While talking about the teachers teaching in the secondary and higher secondary levels, most of the teachers whom I interviewed, expressed their dissatisfaction. They mentioned that most of the school and college teachers of our country are not well skilled, they are not properly trained. Even Dr. Sharifullah mentioned that in spite of upgrading the syllabus, the total educational structure has not yet improved due to lack of skill on the part of the teachers. On the other hand, the con-

cerned teachers stated that the training they have been provided with after the introduction of the new revised syllabus was not sufficient enough to upgrade their skills. Some students and their parents complained that teachers are not sincere towards their profession. Many of them are mostly occupied with private tuitions, which results in the deterioration of their performance within the classrooms.

Procedure of examinations

Questions: The question papers set for the public examinations like the SSC or HSC examinations, are quite prototypes. Typical questions without any variation are being repeated for years. A well experienced teacher of a renowned government school of Dhaka city mentioned that in the western countries, a group of people work for the whole year to set the questions for the public examinations. The questions of public examinations should be analytical to judge the depth of knowledge of the examinees. Same questions should not be repeated over years.

But the picture in our country is a different one. If any one goes through the last five years question papers of either the SSC or the HSC examinations, he/she will find a tradition of having an astonishing similarity in the question papers set for the odd years and for the even years. Accordingly, the examinee knows about the topics that he/she can omit and the topics that are most important as per the year of his/her

examination. Thus the education of the examinee becomes suggestion and note based; eventually his/her education remains incomplete. Meritorious students, conscious teachers and sightful parents are against these conventions.

Questions should be based on the overall syllabus. Questions should be analytical, problem solving and innovative. So the examinees need not memorise the answers. They have to answer the questions with their own capability. Only this kind of questions can evaluate the students aptitude and the level of their knowledge. A concerned official of the Secondary and Higher Secondary Education Board, Dhaka informed that the board authority is going to take a bold step in changing the traditionally set question papers in the public examinations of the new millennium. Board authority is pretty determined in their decision and necessary steps have already been taken for the purpose.

It is known all over the world that multiple choice question or MCQ system is the best procedure to evaluate the students. But this system has not been properly implemented in our public examinations. At the beginning of the MCQ system at the SSC level, the situation was made even worse by introducing the so-called "question bank" containing 500 questions for each subject. After much criticism for the concerned parts, the "question bank" was abolished. Still the present system is not up to the mark as MCQ system has been omitted for important subjects

like Mathematics and English. In the HSC level, there is no sign of introducing the MCQ system.

Mismanagement and corruption: Every year after the very first day of the public examinations all the daily newspapers headline the expulsion of thousands of examinees for adopting unfair means within the exam halls. In some places there are processions demanding the scope for copying within the exam halls. Clashes between the law enforcement agencies and the miscreants involved in copying is not rare during public examinations. Though surprising, but it is true that even some teachers and guardians are sometimes found involved in helping the examinees in their unfair business.

The public examinations should be absolutely fair and free from all sorts of corruption. If the schools and colleges conduct their selection tests for the SSC and the HSC examinations properly and allow only the competent students to appear in the public examinations, then it will reduce unfair means in these examinations. On the other hand, there should be stringency in holding the examinations. Students or teachers involved in any corruption in public examinations should be given exemplary punishment.

Evaluation System: Presently the evaluation system of our public examinations is conventional. Students are evaluated on the basis of their obtained marks. Grading system, which is accepted everywhere as a better evaluation system, is not followed in case

of our public examinations. Grading system will make our education system more acceptable and transferable for a student opting to go abroad for higher education. In the present system if an examinee gets below 30% marks, he/she will be treated as a failing student even if he/she has 70% or more in another subject. But in the grading system, the result will be shown as a "B" or an "F". So the next year the examinee will not have to sit for the whole exam, but only for the particular subjects in which he/she wants to upgrade. While asked about the feasibility of introducing the grading system in our public examinations, the Chairman of the Secondary and Higher Secondary Education Board, Dhaka stated that the present curriculum is not adaptable with the grading system and only the policy makers of the government can approve such initiatives.

Wastage of education year: Just two decades back, one could complete his/her post graduation at the age of twenty two. But now it takes three or four years more. One of the reasons behind this is that after passing the HSC examination students have to wait for about a year for their university classes to start. If it was possible in those days to start the university classes in the same year of appearing the HSC exam, why is it impossible now? It is inspiring that the education board authorities have taken steps to stop this wastage of valuable education year. It has been decided that the SSC examination will begin on the first Thursday of March each

year and the HSC examination will start on the last Thursday of April. Results of these examinations will be published within 80-85 days. Mark sheets will be provided within fifteen days after the publication of the result. If the Board authorities implement these decisions, it will be easier on the part of the university authorities to formulate their academic year accordingly.

Conclusion
As public examination affects the mass lives, it is expected that the problems and irregularities associated with these examinations be eradicated immediately. Concerned parties should be more vigilant and strict in stopping corruption in public exams. The syllabus and the curriculum meant for the SSC and the HSC level should be modernised and definitely the teachers have to be properly trained to teach the upgraded syllabus with efficiency. More attention has to be given in formulating standard and analytical questions. Sincerity is required on the part of the teachers in evaluating the answer script properly and in time. The five education boards have taken some bold and time befitting decisions regarding the public examinations. Now it is their responsibility to implement those.

As the public examinations reflect the national standard and potentially, time has come to pay more attention about the improvisation of the public examinations, otherwise we will be drawn backward.
The author is a Faculty Member of School of English, Queens University, Dhaka.

Some Reflections on the Examination System

by Muzaffer Ahmad

I recall a discussion with Professor Kenneth Redford, still alive as emeritus professor of education at the University of Chicago, on education. He was of the opinion that in the teaching-learning process examination is a tool that not only provides information as to how much students have been able to receive and retain transmitted knowledge but also whether the teacher has been effective in communicating the informed state of knowledge. My discussion with teachers at all levels in Bangladesh has convinced me that not many teachers take this two-sided view of the examination.

I also recall my reading a book on examination when I was nominated to be a member of an international committee by the Education Testing Service at Princeton to review the GMAT/GRE examination. The book provided insights with many historical examples of their own experience. The basic tenet was that the basic preparedness and intelligence of the examinees are distributed normally except that for various types of schools the intercept and Assist on the coordinates vary. So for a given class if the difficult distribution of questions set is normal, then the scores would also be normally distributed except that mean and standard deviation would be different for different class, different teacher and different subject. Only such standardization would allow us to identify good teacher from not-so good teacher and good student from not-so good student. I am sure most of our teachers are unaware of this simple theory about setting questions for

examination. This results in the delight about 'too easy' question and dismay about 'too hard and uncommon' question. There are certain tendencies observed in setting questions for examinations. First, avoid setting question on the topic that was set last time. This does not make sense if we want the student to have an overall view of the contents of the subject. Second, give some questions which anybody can answer as these would be expected at that year of examination. Third, not much attention is given to the language of the questions-set causing confusion. Fourth, the question setter does not give enough time to formulate questions for providing the basic thrust of learning of the particular course. Fifth, analytical approach is most often avoided and the note-learning becomes the basic ability for performing well in the examination. Sixth, examinees are not always selected on the basis of their knowledge about the subject and ability as examinees.

Having said this, let us look at the examination systems in our schools. Most of the good schools now cumulate marks from periodical examination with an announced weightage. This is not widely practised. But the fault of the system is it does not provide for an examination which looks into the development of the fact based analytical thrust which alone helps fusion of creativity and self-enrichment. Traditional or such partitioned approach has nothing much to choose from except that the student carries a lightened load for each examination in a latter case.

The students face public examinations after class V, class VII, class X and class XII before they enter the university. The basic idea is to identify talent. Does performance in single examination help to identify talent? Is memorisation of certain facts and presentation helpful in identifying talent? As we have no clear idea about outputs of the system at various stages we have taken to an easy road of better endowed institutions and students from higher income families.

For SSC and HSC we have six Board regionally divided and several streams (e.g., science, humanities, commerce, madrasah, industrial arts etc.). First regional divisions have no scientific basis. We are putting richly endowed cadet colleges or public schools and poorly endowed village schools with highly differentiated academic resources at par. This has distortional effect. The basic logic is the capacity of the Board to handle the number of examinees. A suggestion was made to create separate regional boards (e.g., one in old district) and a distinct board for better endowed schools (e.g., cadet colleges, public schools, some private schools, some government schools etc.). Second, why should there be separate streams at this early stage? We may offer electives from various disciplines and students could take certain core subjects for examination and certain electives. What is needed for admission at the next stage should be separated from what is needed to clear a level of educational attain-

ment. Third, should all subjects be taken at once? Why should we not allow the student to take SSC and HSC examination according to his/her preparedness? Initially this will create some administrative adjustment but after a transition time this will be stabilised. Fourth, since early specialisation creates academic immobility across discipline opportunity for remedial by taking more than required number of subjects for basic completion of SSC/HSC need be incorporated. Fifth, the merit list is a misnomer as we see from the later performance of some of these students. Thus a better approach would be grade system. But prerequisite of introducing grade system is familiarisation of teachers in setting questions and examination of scripts. We currently give an examinee a marks starting from a minimum and then go higher for better answers. Could we start from a maximum and then go lower for errors, misinterpretation and missed analysis. Sixth, if we shift gradually to a problem-solving approach as we go higher in the educational ladder, could we introduce open-book tests? This could be tried in classes initially with attendant training of teachers. Seventh, the scourge of copying in examination can only be controlled through examiners/question setters creativity in teaching and examination process not by police. These are observations based on my interaction with teachers of various educational institutions at various levels of the education system.

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Healing the Examination System

A Case Study of Dhaka University

by M. J. H. Javed

IN an opinion poll undertaken by the Centre for Alternatives on the Dhaka University campus, a maximum of 36 students out of a total of 70 identified the procrastination in taking examinations and publishing results as the major flaw with the examination system at the university level. For finding out the major problems with University level examinations, opinion of seventy (70) DU students under different faculties was gathered. Apart from the unusual delay in taking examination and publishing results, other crucial problems pointed out by them were faulty question pattern (30 students), excessive dependence on memory work (23 students), centrally held annual examination system (19 students), favoritism and politicization (19 students), cut and dried syllabus (11 students) and inter departmental discrepancies in examination pattern (6 students). Only eight students saw no flaws with the examinations at the university level.

Examination is indispensable in any educational institution as it provides a mechanism to evaluate the caliber of the students. But for quite a time, it has been alleged that our examination system is not appropriate for proper evaluation of merit of the students. In other words, the outcome of the examination is not a true representation of students devotion to studies. It will be *awesome* for the society if university level examinations suffer from any "hard disease" because on completion of university education, most of the students enter service life and very few have the opportunity of further refine-

ment. Therefore, the following diseases (affecting university examination) diagnosed by none other than the patients themselves deserve a proper examination by the doctors concerned before these take an epidemic form.

Unusual delay in taking examination and publishing results

Last year, the university administration served show-cause notice on the chairpersons of the masters examination committees of eight departments because of their alleged failure in publishing results after ten months of the examination. In reply to the notice, most of the exam-committee chairpersons held the late submission of marks by examiners responsible for the unusual delay in publishing the result. Of late, the university authority has set a time period of 90 days (3 months) for publishing the result but this rule is hardly maintained. The worst sufferers are the honours examinees particularly under social science and arts faculty because they have to loose almost one year before the start of their masters classes. In science and commerce faculties, masters classes begin on just completion of the honours final exam but ironically, for reasons best known to the authority, masters classes under social science and arts faculties get underway after publication of honours results. Therefore, at the time when the masters students would have completed their course, the course actually starts.

The procrastination in taking exam and publishing result is now academically and officially recognised that's why in themselves deserve a proper examination by the doctors concerned before these take an epidemic form.

Why the examination of 1997 should be held in October 1998?

When this question was raised, Mr. Shah Muhammad Habibur Rahman, Controller of examinations of Dhaka University had the following to say: "The problem is not exclusively with the universities. Rather the seed of the problem is sowed at high school level. The high school session is from January to December but the college session (HSC) is from July to June. Where do the six months go? Intermediate (HSC) examinations are held in July or August and the result comes to light in October or November. Only then the University can take admission tests. The University needs at least two months to select students because admission tests involve about one-lakh students. So, the loss of two years in the academic lives of students takes place at different stages of academic life, and not exclusively at the university stage."

To address that problem you have to co-ordinate the university calendar with college and school calendars. If the school session is from January to December you must follow January-December calendar at college and university levels. The SSC courses should be suspended by the start of October and all examinations should be held in October so that the result could be published by the start of January. In the same way the colleges should complete admission process by February and end the session by September / October so that the HSC result could be published by January / February and the university could complete the admission process by March.

"In brief, if session jams are to be eliminated, you have to deduct three / four months from studies. Three / four months must be fixed for examination and result purposes. In a two year session, studies must be completed in maximum twenty months and minimum four months should be allotted for examination and result."

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