

# HSC Results

## The education minister's dilemma

**MANZOOR AHMED**  
**T**HOSE who have done well in the higher secondary exam results on Thursday (August 18, 2016) have earned the right to show their exuberance as depicted in the media. It is the culmination of 12 years of schooling and that marks the beginning of a new phase in education, career development and a stepping stone into adulthood.

The Minister of Education Nurul Islam Nahid named an Advisory Committee on the quality of secondary education, and hosted its first meeting on Thursday. "We have succeeded in expanding the opportunities, girls are out-performing boys, but we need to do better in quality and need the advice of the experts and practitioners about what can be done," the Minister said.

Of some 1.2 million students from 8,345 institutions under 10 education boards, including Technical and Madrasa education, three quarters - 74.7 percent to be precise - emerged successful. About 6.4 percent or 58,276 students achieved the highest Grade Point Average (GPA) of 5.

There was a significant improvement than 2015 in total pass rate and GPA 5 score - for the eight general education boards, the pass rate was 6.6 percent higher and for GPA 5, 15 percent higher than last year. The Jessore Board recorded a whopping 39 percent improvement over 2015; interesting because it was the lowest performer last year with only 46.45 percent pass rate.

These numbers beg a few questions. Major change in the quality of education and outcome do not usually happen from one year to the next. What changes have been made in teaching, learning and educational provisions to produce the large difference? If the Jessore Board, and the schools and colleges under it, have found a way to bring about a dramatic change in quality in just one year, this demands a research project to identify the steps and lessons from Jessore, so that these could be applied throughout the education system.

The variation among the eight general education board - a difference of 23 percentage points between the lowest for Comilla at 64.49 percent and the highest for Jessore at 83.42 percent - raises questions about what education institutions in Comilla have done wrong and what those in Jessore have done right. For education measurement

specialists, this variability suggests problems of reliability and validity of the test itself. The academics and experts at the Education Ministry's meeting expressed a wide range of concerns. Some felt that multiple choice questions, accounting for 40 percent of the scores, were a matter of chance rather than a real measurement of learning, and gave undue advantage to urban students. The opinions were based on conjecture, because a serious analysis or research of

point questions. Testing and assessing student learning is not a highly technical task and there are always margins of error regarding ensuring reliability of tests (i.e., likelihood of same test producing the same result when repeated) and validity (i.e., the test actually measuring the competency it is intended to measure). On both counts, there is need for a systematic and continuing research and analysis of the test content and scores and need for refining

textbooks, school facilities and infrastructure, and overall management. A secondary teacher survey by the Bangladesh Bureau of Education and Statistics (BANBEIS) in 2014 showed that for every 100 secondary schools, there were only 50 designated and qualified teachers for Bangla, 57 for English, and 47 for computer science - all compulsory subjects. For Mathematics and all science subjects, there were 1.6 teachers per school;

the public universities, not enough for even those who scored GPA 5. In the face of intense competition, a student may apply up to 15 universities. The universities do not take public examination results as a sufficient basis for selection and students have to prepare for and run around the country to take the multiple exams. Despite discussions being held for a decade, the universities have not come up with a common entrance testing. And the University Grants Commission and the Ministry of Education seem to be helpless to do anything about it.

The Prime Minister, while receiving the HSC results, said, "Our students are as capable as any in the world. Opportunities must be expanded for higher education. We have planned to open a government college in every upazila where it does not exist, and a public or private university in every district in the country."

The Prime Minister's goal is unexceptionable. At the same time, however, minimum acceptable quality standards have to be established and applied in all these institutions. Failing to do so will only mean wasting resources and compounding the problems.

The Minister's meeting concluded with the decision to set up small committees involving the academics and experts and concerned government personnel to look at issues of examinations as well as curriculum and textbooks. This is necessary and would help if pursued with diligence.

However, this still would be looking at the symptoms of the disease rather than the deeper roots. Bolder initiatives with a longer term perspective must be led by the Minister. As mentioned by several of the speakers, attracting and retaining capable people to teach with pre- and inservice professional development, incentives and rewards, and social status for teachers would be one major area. There is also a need for one, undivided governance and management structure for all school education institutes. K-12, as in all other countries, would be another issue. The Minister must be supported by the political decision-makers and the academic establishments in these moves.



PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

scores, test items and variation by geography or types of institutions is lacking. One piece of statistical evidence presented in the meeting showed that MCQs actually were closer to a normal distribution expected of a population than other types of questions that required a written answer. The latter accounting for 60 percent of the marks showed peaks in the distribution - a sign of pushing scores up by markers to let students have higher grade point averages for grade-

these. Our examination boards or any central academic body are not known to be engaged in such research and analysis efforts.

While examination and testing dominated the discussion at the minister's meeting, it was mentioned that the problems of examinations and tests need attention but it should not be the tail that wags the dog. The quality problems have deeper roots, which have to do with teachers and what they can or should do in the classroom, curriculum and

it should be at least twice this number. These numbers of course don't say anything about the skills and competency of these teachers (CAMPE, Quality Education: Teachers for the Next Generation, 2016).

An immediate and wrenching concern for the students who passed HSC and their parents is where the students would go for the next stage of their education. Only around 50,000 places may be available in

# Emerging ties of Myanmar-Thailand-China

**KAVI CHONGKITTAVORN**  
**A**UNG San Suu Kyi's five-day trip to China confirms the emergence of a new triangular strategic partnership involving Myanmar, Thailand and China. The three share a more than 4,605-kilometre border (Thailand-Myanmar 2,401; China-Myanmar 2,204 km.)

Existing cross-border issues - especially ethnic armed conflicts, drug and human trafficking used to be the major sources for violence and mistrust. However, today these vexing issues could potentially serve as catalysts for the next phase of the neighbours' strategic engagements.

A careful assessment of Suu Kyi's latest trips to China last week and Thailand last month showed Myanmar is quickly becoming a game changer in the regional security dynamic, serving as a lynchpin for a broader cooperative framework with our two eastern neighbours.

Together, the leaders of China, Myanmar and Thailand have pledged to enhance their new economic and security cooperation in ways that would strengthen their interdependence and common pathways.

For the first time, Myanmar has adopted a holistic diplomacy approach with the non-aligned principle the country holds dear. Suu Kyi's China trip has created three broad regional trends, which place all three countries within the same strategic circle.

First, the trio has given strong endorsement to peace and stability - their leaders pledging to uphold all efforts to

maintain them. This is important because such assurances in the past were taken with a pinch of salt.

Now they are taken seriously by all concerned parties. Myanmar needs a peaceful border and regulated cross-border trade with China and Thailand. In addition, the peace process requires further commitments by these two neighbours.

Truth be told, some Myanmar officials in private have confided to the Thai side that they hoped China would be as sensitive to them as Ayudhya had been - the Burmese word for Ayutthaya (the old capital of 17th century Siam), which Burmese troops captured and burned down. Yet, the Thai leaders have managed to build new relationships with the current Nay Pyi Taw government.

Thailand has helped the ongoing peace process in Myanmar, facilitating behind the scenes meetings of armed ethnic groups straddling the Thai-Myanmar border. Both the government and ethnic groups have praised the role Thailand played in the current peace process. The armed ethnic groups that signed the nationwide ceasefire in October last year, were mostly based along the Myanmar-Thai border.

It remains to be seen how Suu Kyi's latest visit will impact on the armed conflicts with the Kokang group along the China-Myanmar border, which has fuelled allegations and mistrust from both sides. The provincial authorities in Yunnan are powerful when it comes to cross-border trade and security issues.

Secondly, this new triangle nexus has

been the direct outcome of Nay Pyi Taw's fresh strategic thinking. Suu Kyi, both as the state councillor and foreign minister, has applied her strategic views of balancing major powers and securing better relations with

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immediate border countries, especially along the eastern flank. The western flank is equally important - dealing with India and Bangladesh - but is more sensitive due to the Muslim community in Rakhine State and the insurgency issues she would engage on later.

Relations with India are easier to manage due to the existing goodwill both at the state and personal levels.

During its three-years (2012-15) serving as the coordinator of US-Asean relations, Myanmar has learned how to keep both national and regional interests intact when engaging the major powers - in particular the world's most powerful dialogue partner - especially during the transitional period. Now, Suu Kyi has the liberty to shape the scope and future of US-Myanmar ties, but she prefers to forge closer ties with China as her top priority.

At the moment, US-Myanmar ties would continue without much disruption or progress. Despite the human rights condemnation of her handling of the Muslim community, Suu Kyi's democratic aura continues to shine among US lawmakers - a luxury for a developing country.

Finally, stable Thai-Myanmar relations would increase their overall strategic value for China, both within the shifting geopolitics of Southeast Asia as well as in the Asean context. Tension in the South China Sea will continue but without the outrageous claims as before among the conflicting parties.

For the past six years, the maritime dispute has been internationalised.

With new attitudes prevailing between contesting countries, overall maritime tensions have subsided somewhat. The nascent Philippine-China dialogue will continue to build much-needed confidence in

the region. As such, mainland Southeast Asia will regain its political prominence once again.

With numerous connectivity projects linking China's underdeveloped and land-locked Western region to open seas in the Indian Ocean and Gulf of Thailand for human, goods and energy transportation, China would prefer to build on current prevailing conditions to deepen its ties with the two largest Buddhist nations.

The key to the success of the "One Belt, One Road" mission lies in future cooperation on connectivity and the new initiative of the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation framework, which will also boost the role of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

In more ways than one, China's position in Asean among the mainland nations would also be further bolstered if ties with the two key Asean members were strengthened. Previously, they were at loggerheads on different wavelengths.

This triangular nexus is still a work in progress. The leaders of these three countries understand their combined strategic potential and values.

The first indicator will be the behaviour of China's expansive role in the peace process. It will not be long before we find out.

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**QUOTABLE Quote**

**GUY MCPHERSON**  
 Professor Emeritus of Natural Resources and Ecology & Evolutionary Biology at the University of Arizona. He is also an author and blogger.

**If you think the economy is more important than the environment, try holding your breath while counting your money.**

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

**ACROSS**

- Paisley person
- Light circlers
- Kitchen gadget
- Improvised
- Sheeplike
- Note from the boss
- Petite
- Soaked
- Take the title
- Language rules
- Odometer unit
- 1980 Wilder/Pryor film
- Psychiatrist Alfred
- Kangaroo, e.g.
- Scarlett's home
- Judged
- Shade source
- Chinese export
- Outback runner
- Texas landmark
- Pastel shade
- Greek sorceress
- Move sinuously
- Position

**DOWN**

- 42 Young girl
- Flat-bottomed boats
- Quail groups
- Set right
- Wallet bill
- Schooner part
- Exalted poem
- Musical of 1975
- Lesson
- Play part
- Bounties
- Leave out
- Pageant topper
- Scientist Curie
- Annuls
- Polo need
- Fleet
- Activist Bloomer
- French race site
- Bulls and Bears
- Shooting gallery targets
- Swamp croaker
- Chess pieces
- Badly

**YESTERDAY'S ANSWER**

P	R	O	B	E	S	M	A	S	H
L	E	H	A	R	T	A	M	P	A
A	L	P	H	A	E	M	E	E	R
C	A	R	S	T	E	E	R	E	D
E	T	E	E	E	L	I	C	H	
S	E	T	S	D	I	T	C	H	
T	A	R	E	R	A				
H	Y	P	E	R	A	N	T	S	
C	A	V	O	C	A	D	O	O	N
A	V	O	C	A	D	O	O	N	O
D	A	M	O	N	R	O	M	A	N
E	N	A	C	T	I	N	A	N	E
T	A	N	K	S	C	E	N	T	S

**BEETLE BAILEY** by Mort Walker

**BABY BLUES** by Kirkman & Scott