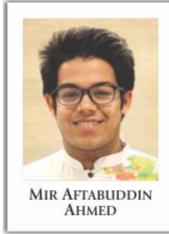


# Tackling the learning deficit



**I**n a recent report published by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, researchers have warned policymakers about the ever-growing "learning crisis"

reading and math. While we can boast about the growing success of Central and Southern Asia, of which Bangladesh is a prominent member, a staggering 81 percent of our students are not learning per se; rather they are going through the mechanical process of finishing compulsory schooling. Surprisingly, globally, two-thirds of the children facing the problems of learning crisis are actually in school. This is where we get an idea of why Bangladesh often

country. Yet accessibility is far from enough when it comes to producing future leaders who will drive the economy forward. Despite that, strides made in the education sector, especially in the ever-increasing net enrolment figures, make Bangladesh hopeful of achieving middle income status by 2021 and also the UN-proposed SDGs. But the biggest problem with quantifying education, as has been the case in Bangladesh, is the creation of a gaping skills hole. Students are being

ratings when the numbers are only leading to a stagnation of the learning process and contributing to the so-called learning crisis? Our society has quantified the education process so enthusiastically that we have forgotten to consider the risks of the regressive models of rote memorisation and lack of conceptualisation across almost all subjects being taught at public schools. The case is not very different for private English-medium schools. We have failed to create a platform for

environment of constant learning. Twenty-five percent of the 15-29 age group in Bangladesh remain unemployed or out of school. That refers to an estimated one million Bangladeshis, who are certainly expected to take on the responsibility of building the idealistic Sonar Bangla. So, there is little room for satisfaction. A sustainable Bangladesh demands a human capital-based approach to education where the students can thrive academically and at the same time learn skills and values—which will then allow them to create and innovate and grow to be thought leaders.

Forcing a student to memorise the answers to 20 math questions, and spewing out those answers during SSC/HSC exams and subsequently getting GPA 5.0 will neither benefit the students nor the society. It looks good on paper, yes, but reports such as the one produced by UNESCO shed light on the hypocrisy in celebrating something that does not exist. So, let us accept that our education system is fundamentally flawed, and only then will we be able to fix it. We want our leaders to be educated, enlightened individuals, not simply businessmen. We want our entrepreneurs to introduce new products and services to boost our economy.

Cultivating and nurturing the minds of the students through active learning and a newer approach to education will surely go a long way in eradicating the learning crisis in Bangladesh and indeed the world. If we do not tackle this problem by focusing on building a knowledge-based economy, we will be unable to produce the kind of leaders that we need to tackle the culture of political infighting, a corrupt institutional architecture and ingrained negativities in our society.

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Cultivating the minds of the students through active learning and a newer approach to education will surely go a long way in eradicating the learning crisis in Bangladesh.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

in global academia. A staggering 617 million children across the world are being unable to achieve minimum proficiency levels in reading and mathematics, amongst other subjects, signalling mounting concerns for the states in their efforts to achieve the targets set forth in the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The report further says that countries like Bangladesh have for far too long preferred quantity to quality, rather than simultaneously investing in resources to modernise flawed academic structures.

UNESCO defines learning as the process by which people acquire knowledge, skills and attitudes. Quality learning, on the other hand, incorporates processes through which individuals can acquire the breadth and depth of knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to: 1) fully engage in their communities, 2) express their ideas and talents, and 3) contribute positively to their societies.

As such, a learning crisis, according to UNESCO, is the prevailing situation in global academia, particularly in primary and secondary education, whereby publicly-funded schools are being unable to contribute towards the necessary innovation needed to tackle the ever-growing threats of radicalism, climate change, inequality and poverty. To put it in numbers, 56 percent of children in the primary school age category and 61 percent of adolescents in lower secondary school age group are severely unprepared to achieve minimum proficiency levels in

fails to produce competent professionals.

Since the 1990s, all governments of Bangladesh have prioritised investments in the education sector. It is heartening to witness the rising budgetary allocation aimed at ensuring access to education for all across the

unable to match their abilities with jobs, resulting in occupational immobility and youth unemployment.

It is normal for parents to be proud of the rise in the elusive 5.0 GPA numbers across the SSC and HSC examinations. Yet, one may ask, what is the point of having such performance

increasing the capacity of students to innovate, create and contribute to society. For far too long has Bangladesh, along with many other countries, prioritised a system of testing that emphasises physical accessibility, rather than the ability of students to nurture themselves in an

Our society has quantified the education process so enthusiastically that we have forgotten to consider the risks of the regressive models of rote memorisation and lack of conceptualisation across almost all subjects being taught at public schools.

## PROJECT SYNDICATE

# South Korea's looming crisis



LEE JONG-WHA

**T**WENTY years after the Asian financial crisis, South Korea seems to have learned its lesson, having taken great pains to strengthen its economic resilience. But now the country is confronting a new set of internal and

respect, the Asian financial crisis amounted to a blessing in disguise for South Korea.

Yet South Korea is now beset by some of the same structural problems Japan faced during its two decades of stagnation: rapid population aging, labour-market inefficiency, institutional weakness, and low productivity in the service sector.

Demographic constraints are tightening. South Korea's fertility rate fell to 1.17 last year—one of the world's lowest—and

Korea's low labour-market efficiency and weak institutions. According to the World Economic Forum's latest global competitiveness report, South Korea ranks 73rd worldwide for labour-market efficiency, as a result of tight restrictions on employee-employer relations. And it ranks 58th for institutional quality, owing to excessive government regulations, opaque corporate governance, and policy instability.

Finally, productivity in the services sector

vulnerable to the escalating North Korean nuclear threat. In recent months, North Korea has fired several ballistic missiles and conducted a nuclear test, spurring an exchange of incendiary rhetoric between North Korean leader Kim Jong-un and US President Donald Trump. This war of words, in which both sides have threatened to launch "preemptive strikes," is raising fears of a military conflict on the Korean Peninsula.

The United States is now attempting to pressure China to take responsibility for curbing the North Korean nuclear threat, with the US Treasury considering imposing sanctions on Chinese individuals, companies, and banks doing business with North Korea. But while China has lately agreed to enforce economic sanctions more actively, it doesn't want the North Korean regime to collapse.

Moreover, China has focused some of its ire on South Korea. Beyond aggressively calling for the withdrawal of the US military's Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system from South Korea, which it views as a threat to its own security and the region's strategic balance, China is using its economic might to retaliate against the South.

In particular, as a result of China's ban on group tours to South Korea, 49 percent fewer Chinese tourists visited the country in the first eight months of this year than in the same period last year. Moreover, China accounts for 25 percent of South Korea's total exports, giving it substantial leverage on trade.

Making matters worse, South Korea's second-largest trading partner—the US, which accounts for 13 percent of all exports—is also putting pressure on the country. Despite the critical importance of re-affirming the US-South Korea alliance, the Trump administration, concerned about the massive bilateral trade deficit, has threatened to renegotiate the bilateral free-trade agreement.

While the economic impact of such a move would be serious for South Korea's

export-dependent economy, the most urgent imperative is to avoid any military conflict on the Korean Peninsula. To that end, South Korean President Moon Jae-in, a longtime advocate of the "Sunshine Policy" toward the North, wants to employ "balancing sanctions and dialogue." But, so far, South Korea has not managed to improve diplomatic relations with its own ally, the US, not to mention with China. And it has gotten nowhere near reviving inter-Korean talks.

This failure has many Koreans scared. Would the unpredictable Trump go so far as to sacrifice South Korea (and Japan) to save San Francisco? The possibility is so bone-chilling that the South is now debating whether to develop its own nuclear weapons or bring US tactical nuclear bombs back to its territory. Either approach would antagonise China, potentially leading to an armed clash on the Korean Peninsula.

In the 1990s, South Korea waited for matters to come to a head before responding. This time, it must nip the incipient crisis in the bud. That means accelerating domestic structural reforms to improve productivity, enhance labour-market efficiency, upgrade institutions, and foster a business environment that supports modern service industries and innovative start-ups. It also means strengthening both economic and diplomatic ties with major countries, while working with the US and China, in particular, to end the North Korean nuclear standoff.

Neither agenda will be easy to pursue. But South Korea's future prosperity, if not its very survival, depends on its leaders' efforts on both fronts in the months and years ahead.

Lee Jong-wha is Professor of Economics and Director of the Asiatic Research Institute at Korea University. His most recent book, co-authored with Harvard's Robert J Barro, is *Education Matters: Global Gains from the 19th to the 21st Century*.

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external risks, which may foreshadow another major economic crisis—or worse. Given the ongoing nuclear crisis with North Korea, a new bout of economic tumult is the last thing the country needs.

In July 1997, a currency crisis that struck Thailand quickly spread to neighbouring economies. South Korea was not hit right away, and many believed that it would be spared. By that November, however, the country faced a sudden withdrawal of foreign capital, which, together with financial institutions' inability to borrow from abroad, quickly depleted the country's international reserves.

The following month, South Korea turned to the International Monetary Fund for assistance, and launched painful structural reforms. Companies and financial institutions went bankrupt, and millions of jobs were lost. In 1998, the economy contracted by 5.5 percent.

But things turned around a year later: GDP growth soared to 11.3 percent, and government-led reforms made progress toward addressing structural weaknesses, including an under-supervised financial system and an over-leveraged corporate sector.

As a result, the economy weathered the 2008 global financial crisis far better than most, foreign-exchange reserves far exceed short-term external liabilities, and companies and banks are financially sound. In this



An elderly man reads a newspaper at a park in Seoul, South Korea. The country is battling the effects of an aging population and a shrinking labour force.

PHOTO: AFP

continues to decline. Fourteen percent of the population is aged 65 or older, a figure that is expected to reach 28 percent by 2035. As the labour force shrinks and the burden of supporting the elderly grows, the economy is losing vitality.

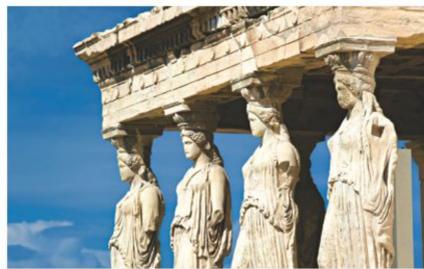
More problematic, however, are South

amounts to just 45 percent that of the manufacturing sector, on average, compared with an OECD average of 90 percent. The problem is most acute in finance, real estate, business services, and community and government services.

Externally, South Korea is highly

## A WORD

## A DAY

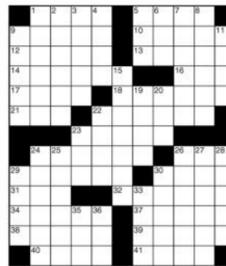


**ARYATID**  
NOUN

A stone carving of a draped female figure, used as a pillar to support the entablature of a Greek or Greek-style building.

## CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- |                         |                     |                        |
|-------------------------|---------------------|------------------------|
| <b>ACROSS</b>           | 31 "—Town"          | 9 Like colanders       |
| 1 Job for a sleuth      | 32 Looking intently | 11 TV's Trebek         |
| 5 Vagrants              | 34 Perfume measures | 15 Cattle activity     |
| 9 Muggy                 | 37 Theater part     | 19 Smooth              |
| 10 Nebraska city        | 38 Configuration    | 20 Shark part          |
| 12 Make speeches        | 39 Heads, to Henri  | 22 App makeup          |
| 13 Hackneyed            | 40 Titled woman     | 23 Mom's mate          |
| 14 Taking it easy       | 41 High cards       | 24 Hardy's partner     |
| 16 Mamie's husband      |                     | 25 Printer's goofs     |
| 17 School on the Thames |                     | 26 Fly high            |
| 18 Kneejerk, for one    |                     | 27 Benders             |
| 21 Hankering            |                     | 28 Borders             |
| 22 Canape topper        |                     | 29 Mount Olympus group |
| 23 Eggs buy             |                     | 30 Early Mexican       |
| 24 Prologue             |                     | 33 Nick and Nora's dog |
| 26 Lincoln nickname     |                     | 35 Coffee, slangily    |
| 29 Growing plot         |                     | 36 Secret agent        |
| 30 Gung-ho              |                     |                        |



## YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

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

## BEETLE BAILEY

## BY MORT WALKER



## BABY BLUES

## BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

