

National University curriculum out of date

Graduates lacking in skills employers need

A recent World Bank study titled “Graduate Employability of Affiliated Colleges: New Evidence from Bangladesh” portrays a dismal picture of the rate of employment of National University students. As much as 46 percent of graduates remain unemployed up to three years after completing their education. Although science graduates fare slightly better than arts and business graduates, 66 percent of male graduates remained unemployed against 77 percent of their female counterparts, and the rates of unemployment are higher in rural areas than urban.

The current trend of certificate-oriented studies is not helping. What is needed is knowledge and skill-based certification because what the study reveals is that these college graduates often lack the relevant skills valued by the employers. Employers need graduates who have adequate knowledge in English and computer skills. The college curriculum does not stress on problem-solving skills or team work which usually put graduates at a distinctive advantage when applying for jobs.

What we have is a mismatch in skills development—what is needed in the job market and what the education system is giving to students at graduation level under the National University curriculum. It is all too apparent that colleges need to work with employers to set up apprenticeship programmes so that prospective graduates can get work experience before they finish school. The education system must be overhauled to keep subjects updated to meet the needs of industry and employers in general. This will entail developing teachers to upgrade their teaching skills and the entire curriculum should be revisited in consultation with employers so that tomorrow’s graduates are in a better position to get placements in the demanding workplace.

Why are so many school buildings so poorly maintained?

Children’s lives and education at risk

IT is appalling that at least 141 school buildings in Bagerhat’s nine upazilas are in such a dilapidated condition that teachers and guardians of the students fear that accidents may occur anytime. Several of the buildings have been declared abandoned but classes are still being taken in some as there are no alternatives. Other schools have made makeshift classrooms with tin roofs and bamboo fences in the playgrounds which expose the children to the scorching heat and storms. Many children have stopped going to these schools altogether.

So why has such a crucial matter as maintenance of school buildings been treated with such neglect and apathy? We are talking about the lives of children here as well as their education, which is being severely disrupted because of this situation. Last month, a nine-year-old girl died after chunks of ceiling plaster fell on her in a classroom in a government primary school in Barguna. At least 10 more students were injured. According to a report in this paper, the upazila education officer had sent a list of risky buildings in his area to the higher authorities but nothing could be done because of apparent fund shortage. The school in Barguna had been built 20 years ago with little or no repairs done. We can assume this is also the case of the 141 schools in Bagerhat and many more school buildings all over the country.

It is high time the education ministry took this precarious situation seriously. If it is a question of fund constraint, it is the ministry’s responsibility to get those funds from the government and carry out such essential maintenance work. There is just no excuse for such disregard for children’s safety and their uninterrupted education. We hope immediate steps will be taken to make sure that students are not inside such buildings and repairs will be made as soon as possible so that the children may go back to school without the risk of being injured or killed.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Increase job entry age limit

The job-seekers in the country have long been demanding an increase in the age limit of entry to government jobs to 35 years. Because of the horrific session jam in the national university, students lose precious time. They need to be compensated for this loss by increasing the entry age limit to jobs. The proposal to increase the entry age limit of government jobs was presented in the parliament several times in the past. The parliamentary standing committee of the public administration ministry has also recommended it. But no decision has been taken by the government as yet. We hope the government would look into the matter.

Nazmul Hussien, By e-mail

Merging mobile phone operators

The proposed merger of two telecom companies has worried the subscribers as monopoly may increase the expenditure of the users which include hidden charges and other higher terms and conditions. The merger may invite more investments and create more jobs, but at the same time, the suffering of the users in terms of money and extra expenditures may also increase. Thus, if any merger takes place, the authorities must ensure that it does not affect the users in any way.

Shafkat Rahman
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Is Bangladesh’s apparel sector ready for industry 4.0?



Up until this point, the focus has always been on growth and jobs and this has necessitated large and steadily increasing export volumes. We have been extremely successful with this policy, regularly achieving annual rates of economic growth of 6-7 percent. The Bangladeshi economy has been one of the world’s fastest growing economies in recent years, lauded by such institutions as the World Bank. The ready-made garment sector has been the main driver of this growth.

Does the RMG industry need to continue expanding? Of course, it does, and the RMG export target of USD 50 billion is one we must continue to aspire to. Economic growth goes hand in hand with job creation, and our achievements so far have helped to lift millions of people out of poverty.

However, moving forward, more and more thought will need to be put into *how* we grow. The world of manufacturing is changing, and quite rapidly too. Many believe we are entering the Fourth Industrial Revolution. This era is likely to be marked by continued breakthroughs in emerging technologies in fields such as robotics, artificial intelligence, nanotechnology, quantum computing, the Internet of Things, fifth-generation wireless technologies (5G) and 3D printing.

This transition to wholly different new ways of working is both frightening and exhilarating at the same time. The temptation, when any new technology comes along, is to keep doing things the same way as before as investment in new technology is costly and takes time. However, apparel manufacturing businesses which don’t embrace these new ways of doing things risk losing ground to international competitors as we enter this brave new world.

The problem we face, and which we need to address, is that far too much of our apparel manufacturing base still looks similar to what it did several decades ago. Many apparel suppliers have struggled to embrace change. They continue to produce cheap, low-value, homogenous goods which are competing solely on price. That picture needs to change, otherwise Bangladesh will be left behind. Only by producing value-added goods will the suppliers be able to drive a harder bargain on price with their customers from the West.



PHOTO: MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

The apparel manufacturing scene across the world is being changed by new technologies, with production becoming more global, automated, highly-skilled, infused with technology and more integrated with services. Our whole RMG sector—particularly Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs)—face real challenges if they are to adapt rather than be left behind. Sewbot technology is in its relative infancy but it is improving at a rapid rate, and more technology players are entering this space.

One challenge that SMEs in Bangladesh’s apparel sector face is that they lack access to specialised services such as technology advisory services, R&D providers, skilled training providers, industrial service providers, specialist consultants and so on. Even if skilled workers and new technology are available, SMEs often lack organisational practices essential for using these inputs effectively.

Another question that we need to ask is whether our workers are ready for the technology revolution we are set to see. Automation is coming, whether we like it or not, but are our 4 million garment workers ready for it? Do they have expertise in coding? Of course, they don’t—not yet. Therefore, government-led training and upskilling initiatives are an absolute must moving

forward. The RMG industry needs to upskill, from the shop floor through to management and board level. On the training and development front, the industry faces a huge undertaking.

More and more of our businesses need to explore production opportunities with added value. This is vital in order for our products to remain relevant in a world where people can wear a jacket that will check their temperature or take their heartbeat.

All of the above requires investment by apparel factories. Can they afford to do this? Many will mention the issue of pricing, suggesting that customers—brands—want digitisation but aren’t yet paying for it in terms of price.

One would go along with that, albeit with the caveat that prices paid by the brands are something which we, as manufacturers, have very little control over. For now, we need to focus on the things we can change—upskilling our workforce, investing in new technology. If we do that collectively, as an industry, pricing issues will look after themselves. The future is in our own hands.

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The invisible people of Venezuela



inflation reaching one million percent and external debt shattering the roof at more than 175 percent of GDP; and an unfolding humanitarian crisis that has forced more than three million people to flee to neighbouring countries seeking refuge.

Both Nicolas Maduro and Juan Guaido, the embattled presidents of Venezuela, are prepared to go to any length to legitimise their office; both are calling on the people to come to their support. In fact, Guaido on many occasions called on the people of Venezuela to take to streets in support of him, to bring the downfall of Maduro.

in the impoverished areas where the residents had been badly affected due to the collapse of the economy and the government institutions. In retaliation, the Venezuelan military, along with the Bolivarians, resorted to violent means and coercion to strike fear in the hearts of the protesters. According to an Amnesty International report, more than 900 were arbitrarily arrested during the January protests.

As if this wasn’t enough, Amnesty International has also recorded six cases of extrajudicial killings by the Bolivarian National Police (PNB) through their Special Actions Force (FAES), in the aftermath of the mass protests. All the six victims had been associated with the protests, and their criticism of Maduro had gone viral on social networks. To give these killings a veneer of justice, these young boys were portrayed as “delinquents” who had been killed in crossfire with law enforcement authorities.

The Venezuelan military along with the Bolivarians—direct beneficiaries of the Chavez-Maduro administrations—staunchly support Maduro. Chavez

existential one—both on a philosophical and practical level.

In addition to empowering the military, the Chavez-Maduro administrations have also armed small “community organisations” known as the “colectivos”. These armed groups have a strong presence throughout Venezuela, especially in low-income areas where people are mostly poor and have to live off the state-sponsored staple food distribution programme. These groups are also known to be carrying out illegal drug business with impunity, with the blessing, tacit or implicit, of the Maduro regime. It is highly unlikely that they would side with Guaido, or allow the people of their communities to support him.

The handful of military officers who had sided with Guaido on May 1, to stage a coup d’état and oust Maduro from power, including opposition leader Leopoldo Lopez, have been reduced to seeking shelter in foreign embassies in Venezuela to avoid Maduro regime’s persecution.

The prevailing anti-US sentiment is another key piece in this puzzle. The United States have a troubled history in

led to the death of President Allende, only confirmed people’s distrust of America and its interest in the region—a sentiment that remains as a lasting artefact from a trouble era.

And one can recall the recent revelation in FBI Director Andrew McCabe’s book, *The Threat: How the FBI Protects America in the Age of Terror and Trump*, regarding President Trump’s outlook on Venezuela where he hints to his intel team that America should go to war with Venezuela because they are rich in oil, “Why are we not at war with Venezuela? They have all that oil and they’re right on our back door.” Such rhetoric, along with repeated statements from the US government saying “all options are on the table”, suggesting a possible military intervention in Venezuela, do not help the confidence of the silent majority.

With many Venezuelans seeing Guaido as an American puppet, his recent comment during an interview with CBS News—that he might be open to US military intervention in Venezuela, “We are open to options that offer a low social cost and that will grant us the ability and the stability to hold a truly free election ... We want the best exit out of this conflict, and if there are options we have to consider and alternatives, then we will”—reflects doubt on his intentions.

The nationalists, who subscribe to the Chavista ideology, are not inclined to support a man who would potentially pave way for the Americans to set foot on Venezuelan soil. The *Wall Street Journal*’s revelation that Mike Pence had called Guaido the night before he declared himself the interim president of Venezuela, pledging US support and assistance, should he choose to invoke Article 233 of the Venezuelan constitution, only goes to show Guaido’s cosy relationship with the US and undermines his eligibility to become the leader of the people—interim or permanent.

There is no revolution in Venezuela; no uprising. Guaido’s repeated failed calls to the people to come down to streets to overthrow the government of Maduro only go on to show the fear instilled in the hearts and minds of the people by Maduro and his allies, and their distrust in Guaido and his intentions. The common people, the worst victims of the spiralling humanitarian crisis, are nowhere to be seen on the streets calling for change. If it is just the attempt of a minority of Venezuelans to overthrow Maduro, and see a government in power with a new alignment, what will remain to be seen is who will gain from this struggle for “change”.



PHOTO: FEDERICO PARRA/AFP

Venezuelan opposition supporters take part in a march on the anniversary of 1958 uprising that overthrew military dictatorship in Caracas on January 23, 2019.

But where are the people of Venezuela? Why have they not taken to the streets in a show of support for Guaido, to bring an end to the “failed” regime of the authoritarian Maduro?

The anti-Maduro Venezuelans did indeed gather the courage to rise against the failures of Maduro, and protests had been staged countrywide between January 21 and 25, especially

and later Maduro have empowered these armed institutions by giving them authority over key state assets, including oil fields and gold mines, and have also granted them control of certain ministries and government institutions, which have enabled these groups to grow rich and prosperous. With the fall of Maduro, their fall would also be inevitable, making the threat posed by Guaido an

Latin America, with accusations of the US interfering in the national politics of many Latino countries written in bold in Latin American history. Throughout the Cold War, the US had directly intervened in Chile, Nicaragua and Guatemala, among other countries, to push out leftist governments from power. The 1973 bombing of the La Moderna palace in Chile during a coup d’état, which

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