

UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

# One Size Fits All



**BLOWIN' IN THE WIND**  
SHAMSAD MORTUZA

**T**HERE is this image which pops up here and there in many pedagogical conferences or academic sessions: a teacher deciding on a standardised test for a bunch of animals involving a wolf, a seal, a fish, a penguin, an elephant, a monkey and a bird. For a fair selection, the teacher declares that everyone must take the same exam of climbing a tree. Ignoring the possible danger of comparing our students with animals, one doesn't need to be a genius to see the absurdity of such a testing system.

Each student has his or her own way of learning, still we expect our students to learn and perform at the same pace

of those who will continue with their academic journey are likely to opt for the public system. Given the low-cost and the supposed prestige factor, the attraction of top-tier public universities is understandable. However, the global outlook and the competitiveness of some of the private universities have begun to swing the pendulum in their favour. The top-ranked private universities believe in adding value to their incoming students, rather than expecting their students to know everything even before they have joined the university.

The purpose of an admission test in the public system is to eliminate the admission seekers. In so doing, a very cruel system has been devised where students are asked to "climb" up trees. Do I need to mention oftentimes such "climbing" was not taught at schools and colleges? The schools (in general) did not offer them a learning culture to help their students become critical thinkers with

me for more than three decades: "the only difference between someone who got into an engineering university or a medical college and me is that the person studied like a donkey after HSC, while I monkeyed around for three months."

Despite its overgeneralisation, the statement contains some truth in it. My friend was smart enough to join DU and became a high-paid corporate official. He could have become an engineer or a doctor if only he had prepared himself for the rigorous tests that assessed memorising skills among others. Our admission system rarely credits those who are genuinely intelligent. Instead it usually sets questions of high difficulty as if the incoming students are expected to become an expert in the field even before joining a programme. And imagine, the same student has to master 4/5 different branches of knowledge to cross the admission hurdle.

Applicants are not tested for what they

and their guardians, they will prove their potency. Applicants are used as bargaining chips. While those in administration locate themselves on a moral high ground, saying, "Let's not air our dirty laundry in front of our would-be students. We have no rights to upset the admission cycle as any disruption will have ripple effects on others." On the other hand, the opportunist oppositions think that the admission season has exposed the underbelly of the administrative monster, and they must go for the kill and end the vices (pun added). Now why would a campus be divided into pro- and anti-administration camps is anybody's guess. Shouldn't educators be all pro-education? The answer, my friend, is blowing in the wind!

The general assumptions are: Teachers are using the admission system as a yearly occasion to make money. They prolong the process so that their billing hours rise on a pro-rata basis.

The absurdity, albeit obscenity, of the system is further intensified by the frequency of tests. Right after two successive public examinations within the span of two years, our students have to sit for admission tests in as many as 10-15 different institutions within two to three months. If you ask me, the entire testing and placement system needs a complete overhaul.

Do we really need the colonial testing system corresponding to matriculation and intermediate? Since we have moved to a four-year bachelor's degree, why cannot we have a four-year high schooling system (class 9-12) with phased out exams like in the US? Even if we follow the UK model, why can't we have a central placement service to administer the admission process such as UCAS?

The supply chain for the university must be streamlined if we want our higher education to be impactful. If the schools are given more space and resources to develop their students, our public universities will have to up their games to become the desired student destinations. There will be a healthy competition to get the best students. Presently, the public universities have the luxury of being lacklustre as their students are coming in steady numbers while their salaries are coming from the government exchequers. The jobs of government university teachers are considered secure unless they show signs of mental illness or moral turpitude.

The private education system is markedly different. Consequently, it is fast outperforming the public system partly because teachers here work under the swords of "philanthropic" investors or ruthless businessmen. They must perform or perish. Students also realise that education has become an investment of their time and money. No wonder, the private system treats its students as clients. It tries every trick in its repertoire to satisfy its customers. Crude as this last sentence may sound, this is the story of our higher education today. As someone who has travelled both public highway and private alleys of higher education, I can only loosely quote James Joyce, to conclude, that education in Bangladesh "is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake!"



## A sector with vast export potential

Make the best of PM's assurance of five years incentive

**I**T may be surprising but true that export of leather and leather goods rank second in our export list. But it is about three and a half percent of our total export of nearly USD 40 billion; the bulk of that being garments. Admittedly, the leather sector has made a slow but gradual and steady progress in the last decade fetching USD 1.5 billion of foreign exchange now, keeping up our effort to diversify our export and reduce reliance on one sector solely.

In light of this, the PM's assurance of offering incentives to the leather sector is an appropriate policy considering the fact that this sector has been identified as a priority sector because of its vast potential. However, in this regard, there are two points that one is constrained to flag here.

Firstly, although our leather products are marketed to the USA, Europe, Australia, Japan and many other countries, we can export finished goods made out of imported leather only, since our leather factories have not qualified in the Leatherworking Group (LWG) Audits, a compliance standard accepted internationally and ascertained by this group. And this has to do with environmental compliance of the industry i.e., whether the factories in Bangladesh are conforming to the environmental standards and that the business practices do not in any way damage the environment.

Regrettably, our factories in Savar are not in full compliance of the LWG. We thought that the woes of the leather factories in Hazaribagh would be over after relocating to the new location; that has not been the case, however, primarily because of the absence of a fully functioning central effluent treatment plant in Savar. We understand that an inspection team is likely to visit us in December this year for assessing the latest state, and we would hope that all steps would be taken to satisfy the requirements of the inspection team. Incentives provided by the government may come to nothing if we fail to come up to the LWG standards.

## Why not ban gas balloons altogether?

Enforce the prohibition on modification of discarded gas cylinders

**W**E are horrified by the gruesome deaths of at least six children and severe injuries to around 20 others in a freakish gas cylinder explosion in Rupnagar. The gas cylinder burst when it was being used to inflate balloons for children. Explosive experts have said that many balloon sellers use faulty cylinders or leaked pipes which lead to such fatal accidents. But it is also because the balloon sellers often modify abandoned CNG, LPG or other types of gas cylinders and instead of helium, use materials to provide hydrogen gas to create the pressure. All this, according to experts, is illegal, yet the practice continues with little action from the authorities to stop it.

It is unacceptable that all that has been done is for the Department of Explosives to run advertisements in the newspapers to make people aware of the dangers of such practices. The balloon sellers and children who buy these balloons are all from impoverished backgrounds—how can they be expected to know about the dangers of inflating gas balloons from newspapers! Making such statements only point out to the callousness with which this issue has been treated by the concerned authorities leading to such terrible tragedies. The Department of Explosives and other public authorities have a responsibility to make sure that these cylinders are disposed of properly and not reused or modified in a way that may pose such grave danger. There has to be more effort and action to make people aware of the dangers of these balloons. Apart from social campaigning with the help of various media, a total ban on gas balloons is in order as there is little reason to believe that this practice will not go on in places where there will be little monitoring from authorities.

That a simple pleasure as getting a colourful balloon should turn into such a nightmare for those children who have died a painful death and the others who are suffering from critical injuries in hospital, is a disaster we must all make sure never happens again. The authorities must enforce the prohibition on reusing or modifying discarded gas cylinders that have the potential to cause such a mayhem.

or style. When it comes to teaching, we have designed a one-size-fits-all strategy. We expect all our students to sit for two successive standardised tests to mark the end of their secondary and higher-secondary journey before joining the tertiary. And even before a teenager has come of age, we expect them to decide on which branch s/he wants to climb in one of the country's 150 universities and hundreds of colleges.

According to the UGC Report 2017, of the 8.1 lakh students who passed HSC examination, only 49,695 students could find their places in the public universities, while 1.2 lakh joined the private system. There are roughly another 2 lakh students studying in degree colleges under the National University system. If the same trend prevails, half of the 9.8 lakh students who passed this year's HSC examination would not enter the tertiary system. For them, the educational buck stops with the intermediate. Most

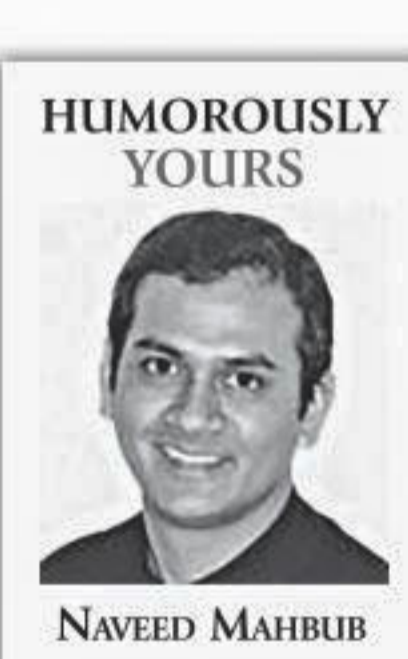
analytical skills and creative expressions. The failure of the mainstream schooling system, atrophied by the lack of good teachers and curricula, allowed a shadow support service to grow and thrive—the coaching! This parasitic system has feasted on the carcass of our schools, and grown powerful enough to brandish black money and to indulge in various spurious activities including question leakage.

The fact that our mainstream system is turning our students into parrots has not helped the cause either. The shadowy coaches (often moonlighters) pose as the ringmasters to supervise the move of our students to the next rung of their academic ladder. Soon after their HSC, students have to dive right into some guidebooks and resort to pre-university coaching centres. They do not even get the breathing space to think and decide what they really want to do in their life. One of my friends who did not make it to engineering school said something insightful that has stayed with

have learned in their 12 years at school. They are tested for their readiness for the drilling and grilling of academic life. Setting difficult questions in the name of elimination (which by default aids the coaching business) is just one side of the story. The other side involves the toils and trauma of these thousands of students who have to travel all over the country for the golden ticket of admission. One notable exception is the medical college testing system, which has adopted a centralised mechanism to avoid the admission circus.

I say "circus" because of the spectacle that the admission season entails. Of late, it has become a rather convenient time for campus agitation. Members of the public universities somehow find it timely to unfurl all the repressed rages or orchestrated frustrations against their administration during the admission tests. Probably they think that by offering this display of chaos before applicants

Shamsad Mortuza is Pro-Vice Chancellor, University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh.



**HUMOROUSLY YOURS**  
NAVEED MAHBUB

**A** bit more about "special" rooms from my column a few weeks ago, when Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (Buet) was in the news for the wrong reasons.

It's room 429, Nazrul Islam Hall.

The word is out that an inhabitant of 429 has aced the GRE (Graduate Record Examination) and the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language). These "standardised" tests, designed by the Education and Testing Services (ETS) in Princeton, New Jersey, put every student around the world on an even playing field with those in the US, or at least must be, for I surely should not panic seeing the question in the quantitative section of the GRE: "If you have a dollar, a quarter, a dime and a nickel..." ETS knows for sure that from the lad in Lesotho to the boy in Bangladesh use the nicknames of all the metallic denominations of the mighty dollar in their daily lives. ETS can't be wrong, after all even Spock, R2D2 and Darth Vader have all gone through the interstellar standardised IELTS (International English Language Testing System) before taking on planet Earth head on with impeccable English con puns and idioms. So, please don't deny my British visa application when I answer pointed questions using *sholo aana, aat aana* and *pach shika* based on a similar reverse assumption.

If engineering has taught me anything, it is to think laterally to solve problems through the mere act of deductions, especially where "standardised" is tantamount to cultural bias. So, I deduce, a skill needed more in the GMAT (Graduate Management Admission Test) for would-be managers, that a quarter must have 25 in it somewhere. And it has to be a coin rather than a paper note,

## Indecent Proposal



PHOTO: STAR

as I can't recall seeing 25 dollar bills (learned "bills" through one of the *Barrons* guidebooks) in briefcases full of ransom money on any of the "dime" (yeah, pun intended) a dozen TV cop dramas. That still leaves me with some "change" to scratch my head over on what exactly is a "dime" and a "nickel". I literally flip a coin and reach the conclusion that one is 10 and one is five cents, knowing that the outcome, with the odds at 50 percent of being correct, will not be known for another few weeks before I get the final score.

Heads I did win and tails you lose, for the results come with a perfect 800 out of 800 in the analytical part of my GRE test. But for Buet-ians, that is also a dime a dozen as just about every Buet student is a math tutor and a score any less is akin to surrendering the future engineering degree. But the differentiator is the verbal part, where we are bombarded with

esoteric words plucked out of the lexicon of the English language ("esoteric" and "lexicon" are words "acquired" during the GRE prep period). I score 600 out of 800, considered a sure shot for any top US school of choice for a graduate degree.

The news of my cumulative score of 1400 (800 + 600) spreads like wildfire, not only through Buet, but also to the neighbouring Dhaka University. Sure enough, I get visits late in the evening at room 429 with indecent proposals of appearing for the TOEFL and/or the GRE for someone else with a blank check waiting. It is a "black market" dominated by a few bad and the ugly with an early start in corruption.

The only proxy that I had ever engaged in is to dare myself to say "Present sir" in the class room five times with five different voices and with a stretch of ventriloquism—I was thus the proxy server of the analogue days. But to give a test for

someone else? That is going too far. I respectfully turn down the offers, a few of which could buy me a used Toyota Publica.

Reporting to authorities about such corrupt propositions was neither mandated nor warranted, maybe because the few shady characters were not the omnipresent Deepak Aggarwals of today and the stakes were not in the millions of dollars or bitcoins. But let's say if it were, I wonder if the punishment of not reporting would be freezing my engineering license for two years. I could live with that, for I, unlike a cricket player, am fortunate enough to at least not have a shelf life...

Naveed Mahbub is a former engineer at Ford & Qualcomm USA, the former CEO of IBM & Nokia Networks Bangladesh turned comedian (by choice), the host of ATN Bangla's The Naveed Mahbub Show and the founder of Naveed's Comedy Club. E-mail: Naveed@NaveedMahbub.com

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

### Lack of nannies a problem for working parents

Over the last few years, Bangladesh has seen a steady growth in women's empowerment. Currently, women are serving in various positions and sectors alongside their male peers, a scenario that was not so common even a decade ago. Many married women have also excelled in their respective fields while maintaining a family. However, as women's empowerment strives to gain momentum, the unavailability of reliable and professional nannies has somewhat restricted the opportunity for growth, especially for the working mothers.

In order for the female workforce to succeed, a steady availability of reliable, skilled and affordable child caregivers is of utmost importance. Many women give up their career simply because they do not have any one dependable to look after their child/children. There are some agencies providing such services, but they are not very good. They tend to be unprofessional and are unregulated. Proper institutional support structure is an absolute necessity to avert this problem. If accurate measures are taken to eliminate it, it will play a vital role in enriching the overall workforce of the nation and help working men and women.

Mirza Mohammad Asif Adnan, By e-mail