

Setting our priorities straight

What to expect from our young learners



RUBAIYA MURSHED

WHEN job seekers look for new employees, they need a system to filter out the best candidates. Indicators of potential or skill are a key component. Nobel prize winning Economist Michael Spence refers to such indicators as “signals”. The signals that job-givers rely on in selecting their workforce should be in sync with the education system, meaning that the education each student attains should equip them with skills that will become good “signals”. This is where the matter of skill mismatch comes in, sadly revealing the reality that our education system is not grooming our students to send out the signals they should be able to. This is one aspect of why we have an alarming rate of graduate unemployment. However, the issue runs deeper than we realise.

When an education fails to properly prepare students for the job market, the signals that employers use to pick out students coming from that education system becomes completely unreliable. For example, academic excellence is a signal that employers look out for. In our education system, academic excellence is mainly measured by the GPAs, CGPAs we get from SSC, HSC and university. I must leave out the English medium stream students for now—there is a chance that their academic excellence indicators are much better than ours. For Bangla medium and Madrasah medium students, the marks, grades and GPAs we get become the whole focus of our education because this is how academic excellence is defined in our institutions. I believe the way we measure academic excellence with so much weight on CGPAs is a problem, because, simply put, it has no credibility—not anymore. Do all students with high CGPA shine as brightly in their work life? Is a high CGPA able to ensure quality in a student?

When the exams we use for assessing a student is based on memorisation, copy-pasting onto exam scripts from the book without any practice of analytical ability, critical thinking, creativity—the marks that student acquire in the exams cannot be considered an indicator of excellence. We

have got to accept the fact that getting good grades in our system cannot and should not constitute being a “good student”. Not only does this flawed measure of academic excellence result in unreliable “signals”, but it also has a very dangerous by-product called “demotivation”. I know for a fact that in our system at all three levels of school, college and especially university, if a student does not have a high CGPA, then they are considered “bad or below average students”. This is a huge reason behind scores of student today being demotivated and depressed. These students are not judged by the knowledge, skill or potential they might have but for the grades they achieved through our undependable exam and assessment system. Often, these students are meant to believe that they will never be able to reach any goal or position in their careers. They are simply robbed of any dreams they could have for themselves. I fear that someday—maybe not too far away—this is what is going to bring us even more darkness then we are already emerged in. If our young generations do not have aspirations—if we rob them of that—then we should prepare for the worst because no matter how high our GDP

growth is, we are going to be stuck in a deep hole of darkness and we will have no way out of it.

What matters most in our education is the CGPA we get. Am I saying this is wrong? Yes, I am. Until we can gear our education system—our curriculum, textbooks, pedagogy, institutions—and our approach to education to be oriented with the skills that should matter—analytical skills, critical thinking for example—we should not put so much weight on CGPA as a measure of academic excellence. Until we can create a system in which a student can write a poem on their own instead of memorising one by Kazi Nazrul Islam, can think and write about how to apply theories instead of memorising the paragraphs in the textbook, can build an argument instead of “briefly discussing” ones made by others, GPA and CGPA should not matter so much.

What should matter then? Well, I believe we should lessen the weight we put on academic records and give weight to students’ engagement in extra-curricular activities, to start with. When a student pursues activities like sports, debating, writing, quizzes, learning to play an instrument, learning a

new language, it has to, in some way or the other, give them exposure to the larger world outside their classrooms and this often helps to bridge what they learn inside the classroom to what they observe outside. With broadened horizons, these students can develop their potential and aspire to bring about positive changes if only they are given the platform; if only we believe in them and not throw them aside because they have lower CGPA. I dream of the day that not only extracurricular activities, but also community service will be a part of our student assessment system. If I could, I would declare and implement a policy that would entitle ten-twenty marks, or perhaps a mandatory twenty-hour service, being assigned to community service in handing out GPAs and CGPAs. Be it cleaning up the environment, planting trees, serving time in hospitals, teaching in local schools—I believe giving substantial weight to social work and community service at school, college and university levels could bring about the massive change in priorities that we need.

I am a university teacher and I teach—try to teach—economics. I was a student of the same department. For years, as a student and

now as a teacher, I struggle to believe that a high CGPA is an accurate predictor of success. Believing in this means that my students who have lower grades don’t have much hope in life. But the evidence in front of me simply suggests otherwise. I see so much potential in my students every day and the promise they show most often has very little to do with those grade point averages we usually judge them by. It’s only been a year that I have been teaching here and I cannot count the times a student has come up to me with creative ideas and stimulating thoughts on something I was teaching in class and has said, “I don’t have a good result, Madam”. Not everybody will attain the best grades, not every student is meant to be first, second and third. What do we expect from the rest of the students in our classrooms? What we expect from them matters in what they aspire to do with their careers and lives.

If the purpose of education is the first thing we should address, aspirations should be the second. The Department of Economics, University of Dhaka is proud to finally address these issues as we observe “Aspiration Week” from November 7 to 14. It’s time to inspire our students to dream better dreams and to aspire not only to get high salaries but to use their degrees and knowledge to contribute in some way to the society, country and to knowledge. Experience is our strongest evidence and so we have invited the most experienced and respected people from different sectors—many of them from our department—to come and share their stories of struggle, their definitions of success, their aspirations from when they were students, how they fulfilled their aspirations and what they believe are the most important skills students should aim to acquire. It is not enough anymore to tell students to study, it has become paramount that we also guide them in understanding why. It is time to value passion more than aptitude, humanity more than brilliance. As we dedicate this week to the importance of aspirations, we invite departments and universities throughout the nation to follow and start the much-needed conversations about students’ career aspirations and dreams. If we teach our students to reach for the stars, some of them will at least touch the sky and maybe, maybe, maybe, some might even discover a new constellation.

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PHOTO: STAR

Universities in Bangladesh should take initiatives to revitalise their education system and adopt modern teaching and learning methods.

Trade liberalisation for development?

JOMO KWAME SUNDARAM and ANIS CHOWDHURY

THE International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the World Trade Organisation (WTO), all dominated by rich countries, have long promoted trade liberalisation as a “win-win” solution for “all people—rich and poor—and all countries—developed and developing countries”, arguing that “the gains are large enough to enable compensation to be provided to the losers”.

Yet, the IMF’s 2016 World Economic Outlook has warned that free trade is increasingly seen as only or mainly benefiting the well-off. The help and compensation needed by those disadvantaged by trade liberalisation has rarely if ever been forthcoming, even in most developed economies.

Dubious claims

In 2001, World Bank research papers claimed a strong positive effect of trade for growth, arguing that globalisation would accelerate growth and poverty reduction in poor countries. Similarly, a November 2001 IMF brief noted, “Integration into the world economy has proven a powerful means for countries to promote economic growth, development, and poverty reduction”.

Earlier, its 1997 World Economic Outlook claimed, “Policies toward foreign trade are ... promoting economic growth and convergence in developing countries.” A host of fund research papers likewise advocated trade liberalisation.

However, surveying a large body of influential early research, Rodriguez and Rodrik concluded, “we are sceptical that there is a strong negative relationship in the data between trade barriers and economic growth...”

Likewise, the historical record since 1870 offers no support for claiming a positive

growth- openness relationship before the 1970s—the correlation was, in fact, negative during 1920-1940.

Similarly, during 1990-2003, growth was not significantly correlated with any measure of national trade openness. After all, the effects of any national trade policy also depend on the trade policies of others, especially existing and potential trading partners.

Baldwin observed that general policy advice of openness should not imply “that no government interventions, such as selective production subsidies or controls on short-term capital movements, are appropriate at certain stages of development.” He cautioned, “we must be careful in attributing ... lowering of trade barriers as being a sufficient government action for accelerating the rate of economic growth.”

Trump backlash

With US President Donald Trump attacking trade liberalisation, the nature of the debate has changed. For him, trade liberalisation mainly benefits large corporations which profit from producing abroad, depriving American workers of jobs and decent remuneration.

Trump’s trade restrictions have reversed decades of uneven trade liberalisation. By insisting on bilateral over plurilateral and especially multilateral free trade agreements (FTAs), he has undermined trade liberalisation’s advocates and their claims. With Trump, the US, erstwhile champion of freer trade, has become its nemesis.

This policy U-turn has not only strengthened earlier doubts about the ostensible benefits of trade liberalisation, not only for American workers, but also for developing countries, who have long insisted that international trade gains and costs are unequally distributed among nations.

Trade liberalisers strike back

Growing scepticism about trade liberalisation, even before Trump’s election in late 2016, had rekindled the IMF-World Bank-WTO advocacy, e.g., in Making Trade an Engine of Growth for All, despite its acknowledgement that “trade is leaving too many individuals and communities behind, notably also in advanced economies.”

Reinvigorating Trade and Inclusive Growth is also unconvincing, with poorly substantiated patronising assertions, as if preaching to the converted. For the trio, the backlash is due to ignorance and failure to better advertise the benefits of free trade. Their touching faith remained unshaken despite considerable evidence, including their own, qualifying their advocacy claims.

Instead of more nuanced, and credible advocacy of multilateral trade liberalisation, unencumbered by intellectual property, investment and other non-trade agreements, they can only recommend targeted “safety-nets” and pro-active “labour market programmes” (e.g., retraining).

UNCTAD dissent

In contrast, Trade and Development Report 2018 by United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) focused, inter alia, on the “Free Trade Delusion”. The World Input-Output Database suggests trade liberalisation has favoured capital at the expense of labour.

Capital’s share of export value added in manufacturing global value chains (GVCs) rose from 44.8 percent in 2000 to 47.8 percent in 2014. Exceptionally, China’s labour share rose from 43.0 percent to 50.4 percent, underscoring how government policy can influence distributional outcomes.

Besides exporting primary commodities, by participating in GVCs, some developing countries now produce intermediate

manufactures, typically with imported inputs and equipment. Meanwhile, South-South trade has also increased.

From the 1980s, much of international trade growth was contributed by East, including Southeast Asia, accounting for growing shares of world output and manufactured exports. By 2016, East Asia accounted for over two-thirds of manufactured exports by developing countries.

“Asia alone accounted for about 88 percent of developing country gross exports of manufactures... and for 93 percent of South-South trade in manufactures, while East Asia alone accounted for 72 percent of both.”

Services: great new hope

UNCTAD’s report acknowledges that services, particularly those enabled by digital technologies, offers new opportunities for development. However, while the trio claim that opening up e-commerce would generally lift living standards, ostensibly because medium and small enterprises would benefit, UNCTAD notes e-commerce is dominated by a few giant transnationals.

The advantages conferred by intellectual property monopolies, incumbency, resources, name recognition and “network effects” favour “winner-takes-all” outcomes, strengthening domination of e-commerce, software, payments and others by a few large corporations. In 2014, for example, the top 1 percent of exporting firms accounted for 57 percent of exports (besides oil, gas and services), the top 5 percent for more than 80 percent, and the top quarter for almost all.

“Big data”, secured by providing services to users, have been very profitably used by “free” digital service providers. By 2015, 17 digital giants accounted for a quarter of the market capitalisation of the top 100 transnational corporations.

The UNCTAD report suggests three policy

measures to address digital service providers’ profitable abuse of “big data”. First, privacy laws must require “informed consent” before collecting and using data from digital users.

Second, appropriate “anti-trust” and competition policy measures should minimise “restrictive practices” and other such abuses by monopolies and oligopolies. Third, effective digital policies involving data localisation, data management flows, technology transfer, custom duties on electronic transmissions and other such measures can help increase gains.

Development, not liberalisation

Trade liberalisation has undoubtedly had varied consequences, and may well undermine a country’s development prospects, food security and more. With trade liberalisation, the main benefits often chiefly accrue to powerful transnational corporations and their business partners.

Meanwhile, employment generated in developing countries has often been seen as being at the expense of rich country workers displaced by the internationalisation of GVCs. In the face of such challenges, appropriate and pragmatic government interventions have helped increase gains, reduce costs and develop economies.

As UNCTAD highlights, “Developing countries will need to preserve, and possibly expand, their available policy space to implement an industrialisation strategy”. But such options for development diminish as economies liberalise indiscriminately, praying for the best.

Jomo Kwame Sundaram, a former economics professor, was United Nations Assistant Secretary-General for Economic Development, and received the Wassily Leontief Prize for Advancing the Frontiers of Economic Thought in 2007. Anis Chowdhury is an adjunct professor at Western Sydney University and the University of New South Wales, Australia. He held senior United Nations positions in New York and Bangkok.

ON THIS DAY IN
HISTORY

November 9, 1989

Opening of the Berlin Wall

Long a symbol of the Cold War, the Berlin Wall, erected in 1961 and eventually extending 28 miles (45 km) to divide the western and eastern sectors of Berlin, was opened by the East German government on this day in 1989.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Bright rings

6 Witch transport

11 Match in value

12 Pigeon’s perch

13 Fortunate sorts

15 Settle the bill

16 Grass coating

17 Arts-funding org.

18 Spock specialty

20 Parsley unit

23 One Halloween choice ...

27 Writer Bellow

28 Formerly

29 ... and the other

31 Bombastic

32 Liberty Bell feature

34 Nile serpent

37 Suffer

DOWN

1 Distress call

2 Blue hue

3 Sister of Linus

4 Sturdy tree

5 Rascal

6 Erred big-time

7 Gun, as a motor

8 Valhalla VIP

9 Look lewdly

10 Butte’s kin

14 M.B.A. or Ph.D.

18 Purple hue

19 Toad sound

20 Retired jet

21 Golf goal

22 Regret

24 Ones with power

25 Includes in an email

26 Piano part

30 Wall street worker

31 Score markings

33 Help out

34 Tennis great

Arthur

35 Reach across

36 Gnat, e.g.

38 Murder mystery find

39 Addition column

40 Norway capital

42 Summer in Lyons

43 Farrow of “Rosemary’s Baby”

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10-29

YESTERDAY’S ANSWERS

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

BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker

3-29

BABY BLUES

by Kirkman & Scott