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The president’s eye-opening observations

Restore the academic environment in public universities

PRESIDENT Abdul Hamid has rightly pointed out the general malaise that has gripped our public universities over the years. At the 52nd convocation of Dhaka University, he has drawn our attention to a number of problems that are behind the current unfortunate state of the public universities. The president has said that commercial courses have been turning our public universities into business organisations, which, in fact, is disrupting the academic environment of the campus. He was absolutely right in saying that many public universities assume the character of private universities at night because it is common knowledge that there are teachers who are reluctant to take regular classes but are really serious about evening and diploma courses, and classes at private universities.

Many of the country’s prominent public universities have been in the news recently because of corruption, financial anomalies and all sorts of unethical activities by a section of teachers and students. The recent incidents at some of our public universities, including Jahangirnagar University and Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Science and Technology University (BSMRSTU) in Gopalganj, have revealed how corruption, inefficiency and a lack of transparency and accountability have gripped the public universities. The brutal murder of a student in a BUET dormitory by the Chhatra League activists has revealed the general environment of terror that exists in the major public universities of the country.

Now the question is, what can be done to improve the overall educational environment of the public universities? In his speech, the president has also given some suggestions which we think are worth taking seriously. Since public universities are run with taxpayers’ money, the teachers must be accountable to the people. The vice-chancellors and other teachers must ensure proper use of the university funds which are often misappropriated. The funds for research activities need to be increased significantly and stress should also be given on producing quality research works. Moreover, the university authorities must ensure that the graduates they are producing every year have the necessary skills to compete in the job market.

Needless to say, all these things can be achieved only if the teachers perform their duties with honesty and dedication and shun their ambitions for other gains.

Implement UN HR council recommendations

There is a mismatch between rhetoric and reality

THERE is considerable gap between the government’s claim regarding the state of implementation of the recommendations of the UN Human Rights Council and the reality. The UN Council’s suggestions stem from a four-yearly review of a country’s state of human rights, which in our case was done last year, and it is up to a country to accept or reject the recommendations, and Bangladesh on its part had agreed after last year’s quadrennial review that it would take steps to implement the 178 recommendations. Regrettably, claims by government representatives at the review meetings are not quite in conformity with what we find on ground. We wonder why this hide and seek?

The major areas of concern, namely, enforced disappearance and extrajudicial killings, violence against women and women workers’ rights, both migrant and local, have witnessed no progress, at least any that we can recall, since the time the last review meeting was made and now. In fact, the conditions of migrant women workers have worsened and the female domestic workers are yet to come under a regulatory framework; and a lacuna in the child marriage law is being exploited at random. There is still discrepancy in pay of a male and female worker doing the same job. And the fact that a large number of people become victims of enforced disappearance and crossfire, do little credit to the state of human rights in the country. And even worse, it dilutes the gains that we have made in so many other areas.

There is something called public perception and public knowledge. The law minister’s claim that progress is being made steadily should be demonstrable and perceptible. While we agree that some progress has been made in this regard, there are matters that must be addressed and recommendations effected in the shortest possible time, which has not been done. We should not forget that we were elected to the Human Rights Council last year for a three-year term. Our credibility as a member would depend on how effectively we address the human rights issue in the country.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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This is my December

The month of December is a beautiful time of the year. Every day while heading out for work there is a strong sense of patriotism in the air as I watch vendors selling various sized flags of Bangladesh. And as they walk with the pole holding the flags against the winter breeze, the sight of it gives me goosebumps every time. Add to that, the sound of fighter jets above doing their regular drill prior to the Victory Day parade—one cannot help but feel more proud to be a Bengali. But as proud citizens we must all come forward to assist the underprivileged on whom this piercing winter tends to take a toll, costing many their lives. What good is patriotism if we don’t look after our fellow citizens? The spirit of unity is what gave us this nation and it is exactly what we need to progress further.

Tasnim Shikder, by email

Bottlenecks facing Bangladesh’s export sector

SUNERA SABA KHAN and FAHMIDA HAQ MAJUMDER

EXPORT-LED growth in Bangladesh has been largely fuelled by an abundant supply of low-cost labour and duty-free access to the EU and US markets. Although merchandise exports have grown rapidly over the years, the country has failed to diversify its export basket and export destinations. The country is highly dependent on readymade garments for export earnings. Bangladesh’s heavy reliance on the apparel sector for attaining target growth rates exposes the country to a number of external shocks. Therefore, price hikes of cotton may affect exports adversely thus making it hard to compete globally. The readymade garments sector may also be affected by automation since the fourth industrial revolution is underway. Since the export basket as well as export destinations are highly concentrated there is a pressing need for diversification of both the export basket and export destinations.

The US-China trade war may play a significant role in boosting the growth of the Bangladesh ready-made garments exports. Amidst the economic conflict between the two mammoth economies, Bangladesh was able to reap benefits from the war. Due to increase in tariffs which resulted in rising production costs, global buyers moved work orders from China to Bangladesh. Therefore, due to the US-China trade war, Bangladesh’s exports to the US market increased significantly. If the trade tariff spat between China and the United States continues Bangladesh may benefit. However, if Bangladesh wants to take advantage of the escalating international trade conflicts between China and the United States, it needs to opt for the next level of automation and engage in production of value added goods to accelerate export earnings. Furthermore, the lion’s share of Bangladesh’s exports is limited to the apparel sector—almost 80 percent. This signals the need for diversification. Apart from RMG, crude vegetable oil specially soy bean, cotton and steel are potential products for the export sector. However, Bangladesh is not in the race alone. Vietnam, Cambodia and Chile are also competing to take advantage of the changing geopolitical relationship between the US and China. There is a dire need for context specific policies, favourable business environment, legal enforcement and most importantly, a strong diplomatic negotiation is critical if Bangladesh wants to seize this opportunity and become the next hotspot.

Speaking of diversification, the footwear industry can also be a target for

Bangladesh. With USD 626.57 million export performance, footwear was one of the top export sectors of Bangladesh in 2018-19 fiscal year. As nearly 90 percent of raw materials needed for footwear sector are available locally, the sector has the potential to be the next “Thrust Sector” after RMG. Low production cost is one of the driving factors that has been an advantage for the footwear industries since inception. Japan and Germany are the leading export destinations for this sector, Bangladesh also supplies leather goods and footwear to China, Italy, USA, UK, Sweden and Taiwan. Nevertheless, adoption of new and improved technologies, automation, skilled labour force, advancement of port facilities, maintaining compliance and quality, more emphasis on R&D should

opportunity to compete with Indian goods in Nepali market in terms of bilateral trade.

It is high time Bangladesh explored new destinations for exports. According to Export Promotion Bureau (EPB) data, in the fiscal year 2018-19, Bangladesh earned USD 40.53 billion, of which USD 28.89 billion or 71.27 percent of the total exports was limited to 10 countries: USA, Germany, United Kingdom, Spain, France, Italy, Canada, Japan, Netherlands and Poland. In order to stimulate the search for potential export destinations, Bangladesh government needs to take necessary steps. Higher incentives need to be provided in order to explore new export destinations. From export performance over the past few years, it is observed that Bangladesh has started

jute products, private sector investment will play a significant role.

As a means of addressing the concerns in the export sector, Bangladesh government is establishing 100 Special Economic Zones with one-stop service across the country under the adoption of “Open Door Policy”. Twelve of the zones are already functioning. Economic zones help attract Foreign Direct Investment along with local investment, which in the long run play a noteworthy role in expansion of overseas trade. In addition, economic zones assist in income generation and job creation. For exports to attain healthy growth the numerous bottlenecks facing the export sector need to be overcome. If we want to move our value chain from apparel



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PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

be taken if Bangladesh wants to reduce the overwhelming dependency on RMG sector.

On the downside the country has failed to get hold off higher-value exports such as electronics. Bangladesh mainly exports consumer electronics; for instance, parts of television, air conditioner, refrigerator, washing machine, electro-mechanical domestic appliance and battery. Nepal may be a potential export destination for Bangladeshi electronics goods. Being highly dominated by Indian goods, currently Nepal is looking for alternatives. If compulsory export-friendly policies can be operated, Bangladesh has a brilliant

exploring countries like Japan, Russia, New Zealand, and South Africa. The Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) may also be a potential export destination for Bangladesh.

Another major challenge facing the export sector is the export to GDP ratio is well below the bar. After reaching its pinnacle in FY 2012 at 20.16 percent of GDP, Export-GDP ratio has been shrinking ever since. One of the main reasons behind this is an increasing reliance on RMG sector over the last few decades. In order to diversify the export basket with frozen goods, agro, pharmaceuticals or

and footwear sector, Bangladesh has no other option other than equipping the workforce with skills to move out from low-end manufacturing and also ensure the working environment meets global standards. In addition, the special facilities enjoyed by RMG sector such as bonded warehouse, letter of credit or tax holiday etc. should be redistributed among other emerging sectors to help expand the concentrated export basket.

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Assessment in university courses must be innovative, realistic and relevant



M M SHAHIDUL HASSAN

ASSESSMENT of student learning in a course, in general, is interpreted as a means to evaluate the attainment of the course content knowledge of each individual student. Assessment

primarily aims to measure what students know about the course; but it should be beyond that. The assessment of learning should be to make sure that students are acquiring not only the required content knowledge but also the competencies that they will need to utilise after graduation and whether the system is providing students with the appropriate education to acquire the specific outcomes of a programme.

In the old academic system assessment is not related to whether the education being offered is deemed effective or whether it can be used as a way to determine if the course is meeting the learning goals and outcomes. Teachers do not develop and assess their students as human capital in the old system.

Developing countries like Bangladesh where the government is working on reaching a developed country status will face possible stagnation unless the country is able to upgrade the quality and capability of the workforce in line with the demands of national and international markets. This is where our economies may struggle.

Academic programmes must have definite and measurable programme educational objectives (PEOs) and programme outcomes (POs) for their students and programme offering departments must have tools to evaluate their efforts to achieve those objectives and amend their programmes based on the results of the assessment. Therefore, universities will not only emphasise on content knowledge acquiring but also on high-level skill development to produce the most employable graduates.

A recent report (ADB 2015) finds that up to 28 percent of existing jobs in some economies could be at high risk of disappearing as a result of technological changes. While new job opportunities will arise, a solid base of cognitive skills

and non-cognitive skills will be required to translate opportunities to concrete benefits for a country’s workforce. Universities ought to produce graduates who are ready for any workplace, and they should not be pigeonholed by their degree subject. The evidence (Docherty and Fernandez 2014) suggests that employers are recruiting graduates for jobs outside their specialism. The focus of a university is to develop students through a holistic programme of study, and approach to assessment should reflect this.

The evaluation and assessment framework for university students in Bangladesh is different from that in

subjects. Grade to a student for a course is assigned by the course instructor after aggregating the marks obtained in summative assessment, i.e. class tests and written examinations.

There is another type of assessment known as formative assessment. Research shows that assessment works best when it is ongoing in ways that help students and teachers gauge learning in progress. This ongoing, or formative, assessment provides feedback that allows students to address their shortcomings. Courses should include summative (at the ending of a learning segment) and formative (ongoing during a learning segment) assessments.



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PHOTO: STAR/FILE

universities in developed countries. As the university curriculum in Bangladesh is information-heavy, presenting facts to consume, and other analytic and operational tasks to practice and master, instruction and learning remain largely rote.

The curriculum is designed without employer engagement and embedding programme objectives, programme outcomes and course learning outcomes. This curriculum does not facilitate the production of a skilled workforce, and it also does not give any directives to a course instructor in assessing student learning. The instructor sets questions just to measure what the students know about the

Nowadays the most explicit response is the development of an “outcomes” approach or a competence-based model for curriculum development. Every programme has predefined Programme Educational Objectives (PEOs), Programme Outcomes (POs) and each course of the programme has its own Course Learning Outcomes (CLOs). Programme outcomes address knowledge, skills, and attitude to be attained by students. Course learning outcomes that are expected from the course are assessed and evaluated through various measurement tools.

Assessment is deciding what knowledge, skills, and attitudes students need to learn and then ensuring that

they learn them and are effective in applying them. Recognised assessment steps are: set learning goals, objectives and outcomes; design assessments to measure student learning achievement; assess student learning; collect and analyse results; use findings to inform decisions; and assess again. Assessment levels (SOE Assessment Plan 2012) are: student level; course level; and programme level.

For student level assessment the goal is to ensure that individual students achieve the designated outcomes for a course; students must clearly understand the expectations and the benchmarks for their learning; and achievement is summarised in grades.

The intent is to ensure that the students as a whole reach designated course outcomes and varied assignments and assessments from across the entire course are two important expectations at the course level. Programme level assessment should ensure that student as a whole achieve the outcomes; summative and informative assessments, portfolios, capstones or comprehensive exams.

The faculty members must view this assessment process as an opportunity to revise specific content curricula and make programme changes that result in furthering the development and growth of candidates. Assessment results provide evidence of the achievement of the learning goals of each individual student when measured against established acceptable and target benchmarks. Each student’s performance is measured through the assessment and benchmark against either a standardised or assessment-specific scoring guide. These assessments are used to monitor student learning achievement and to provide indicators to guide support and learning experiences.

Built on the vision and mission, the university develops the assessment plan. It is the responsibility of a university to set some standards and each programme needs to be aligned with those standards. Thus reform in assessment and curriculum development in universities in Bangladesh is crucial.

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