

The value of an online education

OLIVER SCANLAN

“YOU dropped 150,000 US dollars on an education you could have got for 1.50 in late charges at the public library,” said Will. “Yeah, but I will have a degree,” replied the obnoxious Harvard graduate student.

In this bar scene from the 1997 movie *Good Will Hunting*—a fictitious Hollywood film about a young university cleaner who can outperform MIT professors in advanced maths—we are meant to be rooting for Matt Damon. For the uninitiated, he’s a blue collar prodigy who out-debates an obnoxious Harvard grad student on the intricacies of American history. The obnoxious grad student does, however, make a very good point, and it’s a useful entry point into explaining what exactly you are paying for when you go to university.

You do not pay for teaching, *per se*, in that you do not pay for someone to stand in front of you and present a load of information. This may come as a bombshell to those who have asked the question, both privately and in the media—when there are so many resources available online anyway, why pay for online teaching?

As *Good Will Hunting* reminds us, however, as long as public libraries have existed, no one has needed to go to university to “learn stuff.” There is nothing you can read, no “facts” you will be taught at a private university in Bangladesh, that you most likely, cannot find out by yourself.

You go to a private university to get a degree. This is not a cynical statement. What is a degree anyway? A degree is a piece of paper from a neutral third party (the university) that is a universal testament and personal reference to the effect that you can do a number of useful things (critical reasoning, write effectively, make an argument, use evidence, carry out independent

research tasks etc), and is used by employers to make hiring decisions.

To award a degree, the university must itself satisfy a governing body, in this case the University Grants Commission (UGC), that they have established a standardised, rigorous, and cutting-edge course of instruction, something that can only be done by hard-working experts. And that this standardised, rigorous, cutting edge course of instruction delivers a number of goals—“teaching and learning outcomes”—including the development of important skills. To my mind, the two most important ones are critical thinking, and self-reliance.

The importance of being taught how to think critically becomes clear when counterposed against the argument that the internet hosts a substantial quantity of teaching content. And indeed it does have a huge amount of “teaching content”. Much of it contradictory. And prepared by whom? With what qualifications? And how do you choose from them? How to discriminate? “Teaching content” and “free online resources” are broad catch-all terms that cover all manner of sins. To the parents who happen to be reading this, I would delicately point out that unlike public libraries, the internet has no librarians. The benefits of *guided* independent study are manifold, not least of which is the sharp reduction in the chances of your child blurting out some unfettered bilge in polite company, concerning the hazards of vaccines, for example, or the “fact” that the earth is flat. Structure, painstaking design, questions and feedback, discussion of how to weigh different kinds of evidence in the scales of critical analysis, are all crucial stuff. All part of a degree.

As for self-reliance, the ability of a student to go away and work independently, to solve problems independently, use their own initiative, (in the corporate jargon), “to be a self-starter” seems to be the skill most

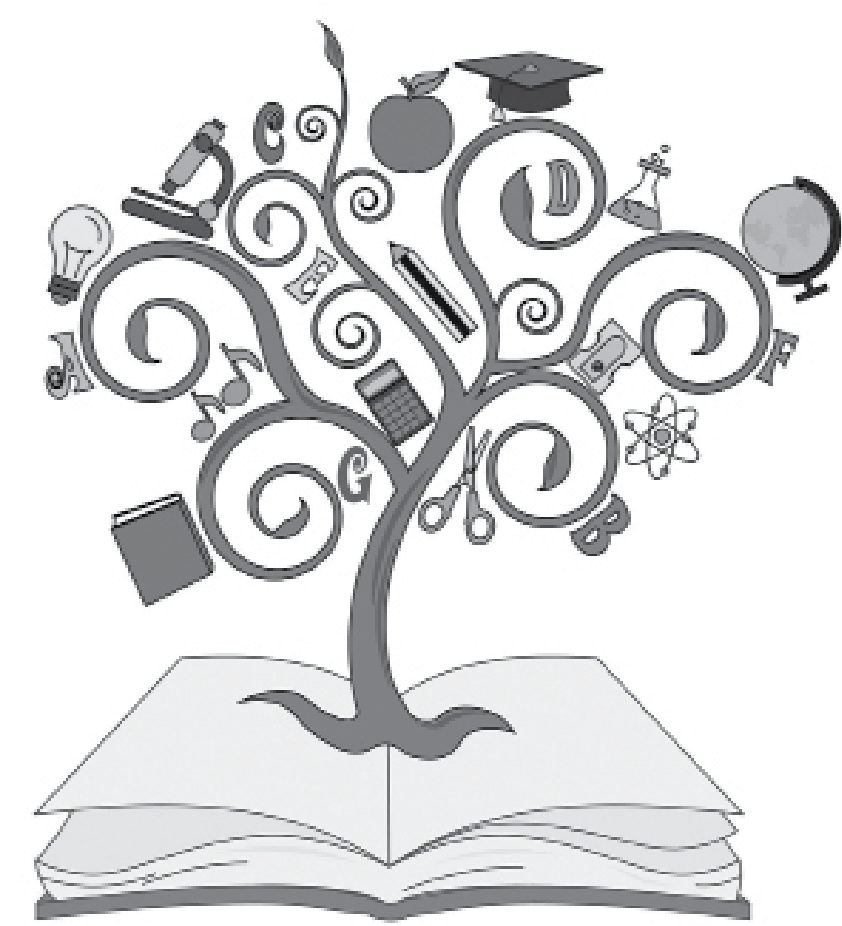


PHOTO: COLLECTED

prized by employers and managers. To the employers and managers reading this, I ask you the question: when you assign an employee a task, do you prefer those who just go and get it done, or the ones who are constantly coming back to you, asking questions, how to do this, how to do that? Do you want “self-starters”, or people who need “a lot of support”?

University is meant to mark that transition phase between the school and the “real world”, and this “real world” just got a whole lot tougher in 2020 amidst the Covid-19 pandemic.

As a teacher, our job is not to teach “facts”, our job is to train and coach students to think for themselves, and to be able to work independently. When I am asked questions by my students I almost never give them the answer. I tell them where they can go to *find* the answer. Because once I do that, they don’t need to ask me any more questions on that particular topic. They can do it for themselves; they have become self-reliant.

Teaching online will not hinder this process of earning a degree. Students will still be following a standardised,

rigorous course of instruction, designed by experts. They will still have the guidance of those experts, and materials put together by those experts. They will still be assessed by those experts, and receive feedback from them, according to a common set of standards. They will still be told by those experts to go away and look things up themselves and become self-reliant, thereby earning that piece of paper that vouches for their ability to actually do useful stuff.

Is something lost with remote learning where students facing unusual hardship, or specific and special circumstances, need particular pastoral care? Obviously there is; we are social beings after all. But we are also very good at adaptation and innovation. I know for a fact that all of our colleagues at University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB) are already bending over backwards to address the challenges of shifting to online classes. There have been steep learning curves, behind the scene meetings and training sessions as we search for the best options for online teaching that is contextual and suitable for teaching online in Bangladesh. The level of care for students at our institution is second to none.

So should you drop USD 150,000 on an education you could otherwise get for USD 1.50 in late fees from the local public library?

The answer is “no” if you’re Matt Damon in *Good Will Hunting*: a fictional prodigy who can outperform MIT professors in advanced maths. For everyone else, in the absence of alternatives, a structured, standardised, cutting edge, guided course of independent learning, all of it put together and delivered by experts, is very much worth it, whether online or not.

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What changes do we want in a post-pandemic Bangladesh?



RUBAIYA MURSHED

“IT’S going to be a long night,” I thought to myself as I pressed the redial button for the fourth time. The phone started ringing and I waited for Moni to receive it. I

dialled Abu Bakar Siddique’s number. The phone kept ringing. No answer there either. Moni and Abu Bakar Siddique are homeless children I had befriended during my time as a student at the University of Dhaka. They live on the outskirts of Dhaka now. After all these years, they are still struggling to survive and that is where I, as a person who tried to make a difference for them, have failed tremendously. As much as I want to deny it, the worst is now here in the form of Covid-19 and it is, if anything, as revealing as a drop of blood in a clean glass of water.

It took me six years of running a school for these children with my friends, starting an NGO, arranging some meals every year on special occasions and then eventually four of our homeless children—our little brothers—dying in a fire, to finally realise that I was making no real difference in the children’s lives. Through it all, my experiences have taught me one important lesson: empowerment should be the goal because charity is rarely effectively sustainable.

Just look at the situation around us. While I am writing this in the comfort of my home and while most of you are reading this from the comfort of

yours, there are countless men, women and children—in our country alone—worrying about whether they will again have to go to sleep tonight on an empty stomach. For now, we need to save these people before anything else. Right now, nothing else matters. What is wonderful is how hundreds of people—the *aam jonota*—have come forward with their organisations, NGOs and businesses to feed families in need. What is sad is that

resources to the needy in a more effective way. The best ideal situation would be if all the NGOs were part of the same system, which makes sure that resources are distributed in such a way that nobody is left out. There is also the matter of consistency and keeping these efforts ongoing through the upcoming months of hardship. Systems matter, and emphasising the need to focus on empowerment and ending our reliance



STAR FILE PHOTO

Train our people, give them quality education, empower them, so that the next time a pandemic hits, they won’t have to fight for a handful of rice.

the bigger authorities really could have done so much more for those amongst us who need help the most.

What use is celebrating our “soon-to-become-middle-income-country” status if when push comes to shove, we are still contemplating how to make sure people don’t die of hunger? We need infrastructure and a systematic approach to be able to mobilise and distribute

on charity is what brings me to the next point. If we are to start thinking about what needs to change based on the lessons this pandemic has taught us, what differences in policy, action and implementation do we want to see?

It is time to let go of the “cheap labour comparative advantage” that we have been so proud of. It may have brought us success in the past, but at a

cost. At the cost of thousands of women and men working in factories ignoring the rules of compliance or other settings where their basic rights as workers are ignored, and earning not even enough to have a minimum standard of life with clean water, sanitation, quality health services and education. This is sadly the case for our RMG workers, farmers, day labourers and thousands of the people we, as a nation, have not cared about enough. It is time to change this narrative. No more cheap labour. Train our people, give them quality education, empower them. So that the next time a pandemic hits, our people won’t have to fight for a handful of rice from the torn sack that fell off the charity truck onto the streets.

I admit, our people are trapped in a vicious cycle that is interlinked with poverty, inequality, healthcare, education and many other factors. However, factors such as corruption, indifference and sheer ignorance also exists in this cycle. I believe we can restart and accelerate the whole process if we can finally start to call a spade a spade, and start with the latter factors. Any success this nation has is because of the hard-working “*khete-khauwa*” people who have not been given the dignity they deserve. Once this is over, we need to brainstorm and figure out how to improve their standards of living. Basic income, welfare state or social security—we desperately need something.

What changes do we actually want? I want a decent quality of life for all our people. I want human rights and empathy to be our topmost priority. I want social work to be a part of our education system, right next to homework. I want videos to be made

of the good initiatives and the love, so that one day when schools reopen—children will be shown films and be told stories with people at the centre as examples of real success. I want our children to be proud of our poor farmers. I want the narrative to be changed so that our children want to become researchers, not rich. I want that our country will pay twice, even thrice, to our Bangladeshi researchers and scientists spread all over the world to come back home and train, teach and raise the next generation of researchers. I want ethics, inclusiveness and tolerance to be the first output in every educated being in our country. I want our experts to be chosen not through connections, but through merit.

We don’t need a high GDP to set our priorities straight. Tomorrow is ours, and we have got to start figuring out what we want tomorrow’s Bangladesh to be. Arundhati Roy says “Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew.” This might just be the one chance our generation will get to set this country’s priorities straight. This is our golden opportunity. We are in for a fight and hard times are ahead if we are to refresh and restart. I dedicate this article—my own little way of showing respect—to the people risking their lives for others and stepping out of their comfort zones to feed someone else, to give someone else care. It is for these people and the inspiration that they are that I am encouraged, willing and determined to be a part of changing the narrative. Are you?

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ON THIS DAY
IN HISTORY

TIANANMEN HUNGER STRIKES
May 13, 1989
Thousands of student protesters in Tiananmen Square went on a hunger strike in order to push for talks with Communist Party leaders on this day in 1989, in Beijing, China.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Goes for

6 Half of a '60s group

11 Open, in a way

12 Dote on

13 Caesar's land

14 Sized up

15 Try out

16 Red hue

18 Diner dessert

19 Bulldog backer

20 Crew need

21 Dispatched

23 Forest flora

25 Machinery part

27 Grumpy friend

28 "The Plague"

author

30 "Apollo 13" org.

33 Easy victim

34 Field worker

36 For each

37 Assailed

39 Smidge

40 Tickle

41 Treat badly

43 Singer Simon

44 Blockhead

45 Patellae places

46 Used up

DOWN

1 Funny folks

2 Infant outfit

3 Shot of a PC

4 Road sealer

5 Word separator

6 Single no more

7 Cain's father

8 Animation style

9 Bowls

10 Passover meal

17 TV alien

22 Cruise in the movies

24 Harry's friend

26 Patient carriers

28 Alligator's kin

29 Part of a match

31 Fall, e.g.

32 Fiery

33 Not taut

35 Lathers

38 Cruise stop

42 Jazz style

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BEEBLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT