

THE ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE PROJECT

How many students want to leave their university and why?

The Academic Experience Project is a faculty-student collaborative work aimed to glean insights about the experiences of tertiary-level students. Each Friday, The Daily Star publishes an op-ed highlighting its findings. This is the sixth article of the series.

MD. UMOR FAROOQUE and SYED SAAD ANDALEEB

Do any of our universities, public and private, ever ask their students: "Have you thought of leaving your institution for another?" We would urge administrators to conduct this exercise at least once during their tenure; it would provide powerful insight into the minds of their charges who come to the institution with hopes, dreams, and aspirations. For many, unfortunately, these dreams turn into disappointment, discontent, regret, frustration, and resignation.

In our study, we did ask students about their intention to leave their university. Not knowing what the outcome would be, we were indeed surprised! Of the 358 respondents from various universities, 35 percent of them replied with a resounding "Yes." Roughly one out of three students thought of leaving their current university. That number reflects the educational experience of students and ought to raise eyebrows.

Let's look at a few comments that these students offered about their academic experience. One student indicated that her institution was (stereotypical and) unimaginative. "I'm tired of PowerPoint presentations. Nobody talks about new ideas or innovation."

A second student volunteered: "Laughably poor standards of pedagogy. The focus of the institution is neither on its students nor on research. 'Research' produced by [some] faculty are often semi-plagiarised from students' work and are glorified literature reviews, not real articles. Authority is too absorbed [in wielding

power] to actually listen to and serve their most valuable [asset]: their students."

Student comments were replete with similar themes that revealed frustrations, as well as a few accusations and condemnations. If only faculty and academic administrators were listening! One gets the sense that there

of the most important and cherished stepping stones for students who devote a considerable amount of time in deciding which academic institution to get admitted into, or which subjects to study. Parents, elder siblings, relatives, and friends—everyone tries to provide input into this decision. You'd think when a student does

Moreover, male students' satisfaction showed a high level of variation (a statistical measure) in their response patterns. Female students exhibited less variation. These findings forced us to ask whether and the extent to which the universities are doing a good job of providing education and other services.

In one sense, students are "paying customers" of their universities.

That makes it a responsibility of the universities to assess whether and how much their efforts are benefiting the students. Regardless of the academic programmes, it should never be a one-way delivery process where the students are considered to be passive and voiceless recipients of education. Instead, universities should start to listen and look for creative and engaging ways of helping the students best meet their goals.

Another problem is the availability of seats in the universities. Engineering and medical subjects are the most sought-after subjects for the students of science backgrounds. Yet only a handful of them are able to secure a place through a fiercely competitive admission process. The number of seats is also limited for other preferred subjects. Thus, a significant number of students end up choosing subjects *not* in their priority list. This affects their desire to continue studies.

Even for the students who do get admitted into their preferred university or subject, their satisfaction is not generated automatically. Several factors determine their satisfaction level, e.g. the quality of education, faculty-student relationship, campus environment, career orientation, etc. So, whenever there is a gap between their expectations and what they actually receive, dissatisfaction begins

to set in.

An important question to ask is, how dissatisfied must a student be to consider leaving her or his academic institution? We recognise that our universities face a lot of limitations in providing a high level of educational experiences. The key, however, is to understand the expectation gap between the students and the university authorities. Then ways must be found to close this gap.

Research on student satisfaction with their individual universities, as well as at a macro level, can provide useful insights. The university-level research will identify the specific issues faced by the students of that university. The macro-level research will reveal the common issues faced by the students across all universities.

Once there is an actual assessment of the problems that students face, the major and pressing issues can be targeted for improvement, considering resource limitations. In phases, all the problems can be gradually addressed. It may be noted that Harvard is nearly 400 years old, and it still exerts efforts on improving. Building a university is a work-in-progress.

The importance of higher education for the overall development of the country cannot be overstated. When a significant percentage of the students are unhappy with their academic institutions and wish to exit, surely something is not right. It's time we started listening to them to make the needed changes.

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File photo of students waiting in line to get into the central library of Dhaka University.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

is very little institution-building at play at the universities; mostly it is business as usual—admit students, grab their money, give them a certificate, and send them off with inspiring graduation speeches and little else. Few, if any, universities are giving serious thought to students' employability and their future.

University-level education is one

finally decide to seek admission into a university, she or he would be confident of that decision.

Unfortunately, that's not the case for many students. If we dig down a little, male and female students seemed to be equally inclined to leave. Males rated their satisfaction with academic institutions at 4.48 on a 7-point scale, while the females gave a rating of 4.38.

Tackling corruption is impossible without democracy

N N TARUN CHAKRAVORTY

CORRUPTION is at once a bureaucratic, institutional and political problem. A cure for this problem lies in accountability because there is a clear connection between corruption and lack of accountability. Corruption takes place when the agent and the client collude, according to the principal-agent-client theory, where the agent (politicians and bureaucrats) does not need to be accountable to the principal (people of the country). Here the clients are the people who seek to have license, permit, registration, etc. from the government or have to go to government offices to get things done. Good governance and accountability—two basic components of democracy—are key factors for economic and human development because only in a purely democratic environment, it is possible to avert the unholy collusion between the politician or bureaucrat and the people going to government offices to get things done. It is worth saying at this point that people are compelled to pay bribe because of the corrupt trap set by the bureaucrats, taking advantage of bureaucratic doldrums.

Amartya Sen, in his book *Poverty and Famines*, emphasised the importance of democracy to avert this trap. Sen describes democracy as a form

of universal values and says that it is democracy that can also avert famines. Democracy is essentially a system where existence of multiple parties, election and criticism of government by the opposition are its integral parts. Sen in his book *Development as Freedom* shares the same view and adds that free media and presence of the opposition are a must for development.

There is a huge literature on the relationship of corruption with institutional and political systems, and on the relationship of democracy with growth in the economic and political realms. That without democracy good governance and a corruption-free society cannot be built is the central message of many studies.

Consider the fact that once there were many countries including the then Soviet Union where the socialist/communist system was in place. Now it exists only in Cuba and North Korea. All states belonging to the erstwhile Soviet Union have been following capitalist economic models since their separation. In China, only one feature of the communist system exists. Dictatorship of the proletariat is an amazing philosophy no doubt. But the problem started when the leaders and activists of the Communist Party refused to remain proletarian any longer, and wanted to own wealth and means of production.

When democratic practices are absent within the party, when party leaders behave like bureaucrats and when there is no scope to bring a change in party leadership, despite numerous complaints against them, corruption must come in. And it did.

Jean-Paul Sartre's belief in communism is well-known although he was never a member of the French Communist Party. He remained a true believer of communism until he died. However, he was also a stern critic of Stalin's regime. To give communism a humane face, Sartre felt the necessity of democracy. The reason why he liked the Cuban Communist Party so much is that there were democratic practices within the party. Ahead of the party congress, extensive discussion meetings, exchanges of views and debates were held. For example, in 1991's congress, there were 89,000 meetings in total, where 3.5 million Cubans participated from inside and outside the Communist Party. Any one, whether from within the party or outside, was able to raise complaints against any party leader. To represent in the National Assembly, one had to have 50 percent of the votes from his or her constituency. The central message of what has been said about Cuba is that, without democracy, without opposition and without checks and balances, corruption is bound to come

in.

Bertrand Russel mentioned three motivations in the preamble of his autobiography. One of them is his endless love for the distressed humanity. Perhaps that was the reason why he considered himself a socialist. He visited the erstwhile Soviet Union as one of the team members representing the British Labour Party in 1920. Although he was not disillusioned by socialism, he did not like the socialist model existing in the Soviet Union at that time. That a system without freedom of speech, opposition parties and freedom to gather gives rise to autocracy, was witnessed by Bertrand Russel himself. It is surprising that after a one-month visit, what he wrote of the situation prevailing in the Soviet Union in his diary now prevails in Bangladesh, a country of parliamentary democracy. He wrote, "All kinds of tricks are being adopted on the way to an absolute dictatorship under which the opposition parties—even leftist parties—are not free to speak and gather." I hope the readers have not forgotten that even the leftist parties in Bangladesh under the current regime have not been always allowed to assemble to have their say, and that the scene of the baton charge on leftist protesters is still fresh in their memory.

Joe Devine, a professor at Bath University, refuses to accept the

popular narrative of growth and development as indicative of real development. When Bangladesh has already earned her reputation for development, David Luis, a professor of economics at the London School of Economics, mentions the lack of good governance and widespread corruption in his book *Bangladesh: Politics, Economy and Civil Society*. He also says that the parliamentary system here has not been effective at all and that although the democratic process was introduced after 15 years of army rule, there has been little change in the corruption perception index of the country. It means, what is being called a democratic system is not actually a democracy, because accountability, which is at the centre of any democracy, is missing here. Often, after being elected as members of parliament, leaders are seen to concentrate on gathering wealth rather than being accountable to the people because they know that it is money that can help them manage party tickets for the next election and then purchase votes. This cannot go on. We must enforce accountability and good governance to truly benefit from democracy.

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15	Bud	41 Successor	13	Lord's domain
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BEETLE BAILEY



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BABY BLUES



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QUOTEABLE



ALEKSANDR SOLZHENITSYN
(1918-2008)
Russian novelist and historian.
Any man who has once proclaimed violence as his method is inevitably forced to take the lie as his principle.