

ASPIRATIONS FOR THE NEXT 50 YEARS

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The future contours of education in Bangladesh

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Being in the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), let's consider two scenarios: In one, consortiums of universities no longer offer terminal degrees. They offer students a menu of courses to choose from and develop relevant skills to shape their own destinies. The general feeling is certificates and terminal degrees are overrated and useless.

Employers also play a role by specifying combinations of courses that would meet specific job

requirements. Upon completion, students are immediately connected to the (global) job market by another consortium of recruiting agencies.

In the second scenario, it is all artificial intelligence (AI) driven: financial and technology giants like Google, Amazon, Microsoft or some new goliath compile "useful" courses across disciplines (based on demand) and make them available to learners across the world who are subsequently linked to employers. There are no human teachers (many of them are overrated anyway) and the delivery of courses, assessment, grades, and certification are fair and quick (no human mistakes, irresponsible delays, or frailties that mess up these processes).

Millions of students, after their foundational learning is developed in their early years, converge on self-selected combinations of courses (avoiding the imposed requirements universities use to inflate revenues) aligned with their personal interests that are taught in interesting and engaging ways by challenging the mind rather than emphasizing rote learning. The cost of a set of courses is also much lower because of economies of scale.

In this menu-driven system, one can exit from the learning stream at any time or jump into it to upskill and upgrade themselves for the next level in one's career: knowledge acquisition is self-driven! There are no age limits, no need to meet admission criteria (e.g., two first divisions or high GPAs), no more universities to go to, no more

difficult and rogue teachers to deal with, optional payment plans, and so on.

Are the two scenarios really inconceivable or distant? That really depends on various factors and, of course, politics. For sure, there will be vigorous attempts to thwart the intrusion of the two scenarios. Regulators will impose impossible conditions; universities will rant and rage about the utility of job-aligned courses (which is can easily be embellished); teachers will lament their job losses and fight tooth and nail to keep AI out; administrators will push back because of lacking in innovation and being resistant to change; and so on. Okay, AI is unlikely to be here soon. But what do we do in the meanwhile?

THE CONTEXT OF EDUCATION
To address any system, it is important first and foremost to understand the context – the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. Many accomplishments can be listed in this nation's 50-year journey. Poverty has been substantially reduced, health outcomes (infant mortality, maternal mortality, HIV/AIDS, cholera, life expectancy, etc.) are laudable, self-sufficiency in food (per capita) production has surpassed expectations, economic growth (powered by exports and remittances) is enviable, infrastructure growth is picking up pace (Padma Bridge, a major achievement in this regard), digital access is improving, family planning has achieved wonders, microfinance and SMEs have been a boon, and

a thriving service industry is on the rise. Even our young cricketers have energised the nation with their flourish and flair (okay, with occasional disappointments). We are indeed a can-do nation!

In education, the backbone of any economy, there are also accomplishments of merit: spread of non-formal education, early childhood development, gender parity in early education, the growth of the education industry (especially private higher education), etc. But in this critical sector, challenges remain.

Primarily, investment in human capital has been stagnant. Halimur Khan (educator) points out the ramifications: We are [near] the bottom rung for many comparative indexes: 135th out of 189 countries in Human Development, 119th out of 193 in Global Development, 139th out of 162 in Human Freedom, and 116th out of 131 in Global Innovation—all in 2020.

AA Ziauddin (researcher) sees education policy across the entire subcontinent still framed in the British model of producing colonial administrators. There has not been much innovation here as it churns out half-educated, skill-deficient, and jobless graduates in their tens of thousands. The corporate world complains that it has had to turn to mid-level, sometimes apex, managers from abroad. All the while our graduates become a national burden and our supply of technicians continues to lag precipitously. Ziauddin observes, "I have come across a physics graduate

working as a clerk; at the same time, a less literate welder was earning far more."

The National Student Assessment (NSA) Project showed that 35 percent of class 3 students did not score at the expected level in Bangla reading, and 43 percent could not answer simple questions from reading a Bangla passage. In math, 59 percent scored below the grade level. Disturbingly, when the grade 3 students reached grade 5 two years later in 2017, their performance was worse.

Bangladesh's workforce of 87 million is also largely undereducated (only 4 percent of workers have higher than secondary education). In general, students have weak reading skills and the curricula, teaching approaches, and examination systems at all levels focus more on rote learning than on competencies, critical thinking, and analytical skills (World Bank, 2019).

Low relevance of tertiary education and skills training is another issue of concern. The World Bank Enterprise Skills Survey 2012, for example, showed that employers believe graduates of Bangladesh's higher education programmes are inadequate for today's and tomorrow's labour market. Halimur Khan underscores that "...our university graduates are woefully unprepared to handle the challenges of the 21st century...a majority of them do not have the foundational literacies, competencies and the character qualities to be successful."

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