

ASPIRATIONS FOR THE NEXT 50 YEARS

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The future contours of education in Bangladesh

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This remarkably rich region is, unfortunately, plagued by pockets of extreme poverty, mega-urbanisation, disparities between the rich and the poor, and rankling problems in the areas of infrastructure, energy and a deteriorating environment. The immediate challenges for the region are youth unemployment, poverty, economic development with equity, low level infrastructure, technological underdevelopment, undiversified industrialisation and exports, etc.

In this milieu, the education sector requires a fresh look. To be effective, our educational institutions must become much more useful and relevant. This is important because, "Workers of the future can expect to change occupations and careers several times and may even end up in jobs and industries that do not now exist... emerging technologies will continue to replace routine functions across many job categories at all levels, even as they

create new opportunities for workers in hundreds of fields, including medicine and healthcare, manufacturing, and communications. These challenges will be amplified by the increasing competitiveness of other nations within the global economy, including the diversifying skill sets of foreign workers." Are our educational planners even aware of these emerging realities?

FINDING TRUE PURPOSE

What do we really want out of our education system? Who is education designed for? What outcomes are we seeking? How can the learning that is offered be made worthwhile? Our children are a reservoir of talent and energy. Properly guided into different streams, they can become raging rivers, turning barren earth into lush fields. Education must, therefore, build national capacity to support a viable, self-sustaining, and competitive nation, ready for the 21st century.

For example, "Singapore [transformed] from a low skill, low paid nation with high levels of illiteracy 50 years ago to a first world economy today, with a 1 percent unemployment rate [which] provides inspiration and hope for policy-makers everywhere."

Education reform in Singapore was "a way of retooling the productive capacity of the system." One writer argues that Singapore's education was not only instrumental in its "miraculous economic development but equally as a vehicle for promoting a cohesive civic identity, based on the ideological tripod of multiculturalism, multilingualism and meritocracy."

It must be emphasised that building our education system is not about copying Singapore or some other country. The key lies in figuring out: i) what is our winning aspiration; ii) where will we play (Agriculture, RMG, Construction, Information Technology, Healthcare, Financial Services, Security, Water Resources, Culinary Delights, or



a combination of these or some other fields) in which we could potentially lead; iii) how will we lead and win (what is the unique value proposition of the strategic areas in which the nation will provide leadership); iv) what capabilities must be in place (can we tussle with the leaders in bio- or nano-technology or should we pick a niche and develop our own brand of intermediate technology); and v) what management systems are required to see the vision achieve success.

POWER AND CONTROL

A question that often emerges is: Who controls our education? The existence of four parallel systems starting at the school levels—government, NGOs, Madrasa, and Private English Medium—clearly indicates that power tussles remain unresolved. One might ask: Who controls the narrative about what our children should learn and how their thinking should evolve?

School children must first be given foundational skills and need not be separated into so many streams. Only

around the 8th grade should attention be given to the different streams into which they ought to be channelled. All of this must be aligned with the overall purpose and mission of education (linked to national plans). Here technical and vocational schools with a blend of administrative training (TVAET) must also begin to play a much more vigorous role.

External influencers must also be better managed. This includes donors, development agencies, countries with vested interests, educational conglomerates, and so on. While they might extend a hand of assistance, their overt declarations may belie their self-interests. We must figure out their intent. It is important to remember that we have a demographic dividend to reap. If we can nurture this fabulous resource, it will give us a strategic advantage that may threaten the external influencers. But we must prioritise our own interests and remain steadfast in our vision, vigilance and constant creativity.

SYSTEM INTEGRATION AND EXTERNAL LINKAGES

Any education system cannot be run in a piecemeal and disjointed fashion; it must be designed as an integrated riverine system that flows from the mountain tops (primary education), spreading out to different regions (subjects/skills/majors), but culminating into larger rivers (the strategic industries—e.g., the RMG industry requires a complement of various skills), that ultimately merge with the ocean (the economy working as a smoothly aligned system). Every level must merge flawlessly into the next higher level.

As a supply chain system, it must allow anyone to step out of the flow at specific points (primary, junior secondary, secondary, higher secondary) for a variety of reasons (health, work, financial problems, family issues, etc.) and be allowed re-enter at their own choosing. If someone drops out after SSC for a certain period, (s)he should be allowed to re-enter the system as and when they are able to retool and upgrade. Otherwise, our Gross Enrolment Ratios of about 10 percent in higher education suggests that we lose 90 percent of a primary school cohort by the time they reach higher education.

Now, everyone need not be university-educated, but there is very little data about where the dropouts have gone and whether they are using the knowledge they have acquired. We don't even know what our university graduates are doing! The knowledge imparted at various levels is an investment; the returns must be understood. At every opt-out point, therefore, there must be a clear set of learning outcomes and competencies that must be ensured that the entire system, lockstep, must be held accountable for delivering.

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