



ECHOES BY
 ASRAR CHOWDHURY

Skill, Grades and Universities One side of the story

I
 Lady Fatima Al-Fihri of Fez, in today's Morocco, established the world's first university, Al-Karaouine, in 859 AD. It was the first time an education centre issued certificates, testifying that a candidate had completed a certain set of courses and was competent to enter the next phase of life.

Al-Azhar in Egypt; University of Bologna in Italy; and Universities of Oxford and Cambridge in Britain slowly emerged on the same principle as Al-Karaouine. Today, all universities are certificate-awarding centres.

Places of learning before Al-Karaouine did not focus on issuing certificates, but they did have common characteristics. In Ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, China, India and the Americas (Aztec, Inca and Maya), the learning centres catered to a priestly class or the royal elite. Humanities, astrology, and science (medicine, mathematics, and geometry) were in the hands of a priestly class. There was no formal age of entrance, nor a formal time duration in staying at these centres. The main focus was to extend knowledge. Ancient learning centres also catered to those who would join the bureaucracy, and in some cases, those who would join the army.

What about those who would become architects, musicians, and artisans? Young people who wanted to learn a skill for



PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

livelihood had to either be an apprentice, or learn from their forefathers. A person's profession in ancient societies was highly influenced by the family they were born into because there were no formal job markets as we see today.

Later in the Middle Ages, guilds emerged in Europe. These were institutions that taught certain trades in the form of apprenticeship. The emergence of guilds coincided

with the decline of the Ottoman Empire, and then the Renaissance, when Europe would become the centre of civilisation.

II
 As universities emerged as certificate awarding institutes, they also developed a grading system. Better students were separated from the rest. These students were then absorbed in job markets or the bureaucracy. This process speeded up after

the Industrial Revolution. Workplaces needed skilled workers. The grades that universities certified acted as credible signals to reflect the skills of students.

What happened to the guilds? They were unable to keep up with the changing demands of the society. New disciplines emerged in the universities of Europe and later on elsewhere that had practical relevance in job markets. Universities slowly started to open architecture, engineering, medicine, agricultural, veterinary science and other related subjects. Students who would study these subjects would be learning more vocational skills than learning for the extension of knowledge.

III
 As time went on, grades slowly started to lose their importance in sending good signals of skills. This has become evident in recent times.

Are skills more important, or grades? The answer, as we try to find in the next Echoes, is shrouded in "the other side of this story."

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satire.

A former telco advertisement youth visits his therapist...

HASIB UR RASHID IFTI

Therapist: This is November 11, 2021 and your third session of this month. State your name and profession for the recordings. Just a mere formality.

Sadman: I'm Sadman Sakib. I was one of the youth actors for the telco giant Gamla-Link. Now I stay at home, usually deleting their promotional texts.

T: Alright, let's start. You said you've been having trouble sleeping lately?

S: Mostly. Sometimes when I do get some sleep, I hear those jingles, those words in my head. They never stop.

T: What words, Sadman?

S: Words like "Yo", "Chill", "Yaar"... You can almost sense the desperation to relate to the youth through words people believe are relevant.

T: Your mother said you still dance in your sleep?

S: When I get some sleep, that is. Others would dance to celebrate the most random events and so did I. This one time, Raisa came back to campus after dropping a semester owing to some personal tragedy. But then this other girl told her everything is going to be alright because GamlaLink announced a new internet plus SMS bundle.



PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

And then they all started dancing.

T: These dancing people, Sadman... What else do you remember about them?

S: They high-five randomly, almost like they ran out of things to celebrate. It was fine at first, but it got a bit insensitive when this guy high-fived me at my grandma's funeral. They'd come to my house early in the morning, splash water on me to wake me up and make cute friendship videos to

put on the internet. Pranks look adorable online, but I couldn't sleep in fear of being woken up to a mob of selfie-obsessors.

T: Do you think that's how your sleeping disorder began?

S: Maybe. Even after being on campus together for eight hours, they'd get back home, video chat and not shut up about how fast GamlaLink internet is.

T: You said this made you lose your friends and family--

S: I danced to GamlaLink jingles for a living, so obviously my family was ashamed of me. I lost my old friends. In any serious crisis, I'd just advise them to switch to GamlaLink 4G. Naturally, they abandoned me.

T: And I suppose this desertion affected your grades as well?

S: Between morning dance routines on campus, chaotic evening hangouts and mandatory house parties at night, I couldn't study and eventually dropped out. That same year, my girlfriend dumped me and my parents separated. You know when I realised I've had enough, though?

The therapist waits for an answer.

S: After I told my new best friend about my misery, he kept his hand on my shoulder and told me to chill because GamlaLink was now offering a 1 paisa per second call rate. And as I sat in my parents' old room staring at framed pictures of my once happy family, they kept on dancing around me. That's when I knew it was over.

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