

Learning loss from Covid-19

It does not make sense to presume that the education machine could be restarted where it was left off in March 2020, as if the intervening 18 months did not matter.

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into a time-bound result-focused plan of action.

A rescue and recovery plan

The quandary for the decision-makers to balance student safety and minimising learning loss cannot be underestimated. Yet, decisions have to be taken drawing on best expert advice and informed judgements about immediate and longer-term needs and consequences.

Welcoming school re-opening in September, 10 well-known educationists of the country collectively urged four urgent steps as elements of a learning recovery agenda in response to the special situation (*The Daily Star*, September 25, 2021).



ILLUSTRATION:
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First, a rapid assessment of students' grade-level preparedness was needed. Simple tools for rapid assessment of core grade-level competencies for each grade in Bangla and mathematics at the primary level, and Bangla, English, mathematics and science at the secondary level should be designed and applied in order to determine the students' grade-level readiness. The result then can be used to place students in an appropriate recovery phase—including accelerated learning activities for core skills—to bring them up to their grade-level readiness.

Second, prolonging the current school year and introducing a permanent September-June school calendar was recommended. Extending the current year (academic year 2021) to June 2022 would provide more time for the students

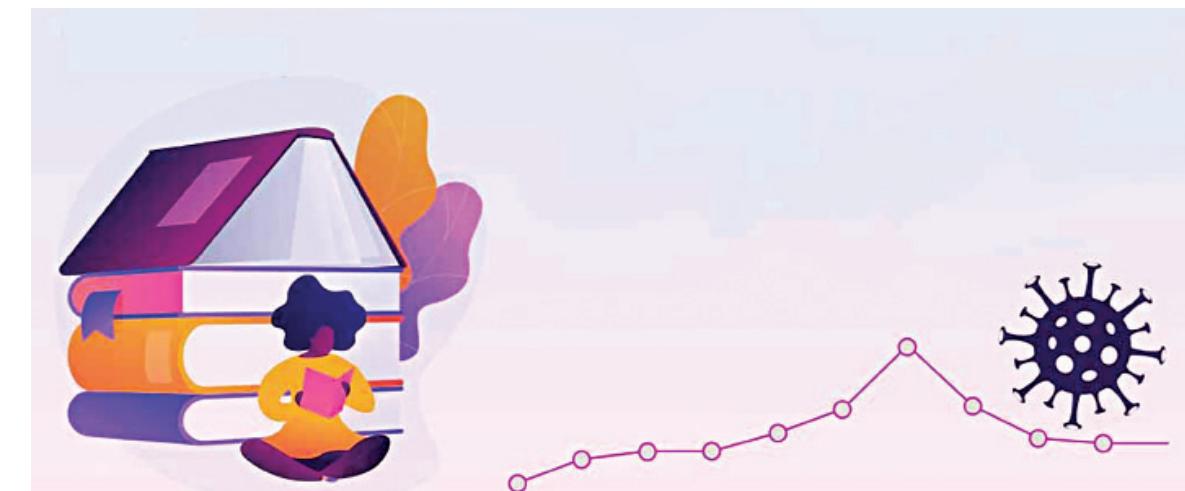


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and the school system to adapt to the new situation, assess and improve students' preparedness, and avoid rushing to public and annual exams (which has been witnessed). There are also ample climate-related reasons to permanently shift to a September-June school calendar, with a predictable and long summer vacation between July-August and classes held during Ramadan with modified hours.

Third, scrapping the Primary Education Completion Examination (PECE), the Junior School Certificate (JSC) and equivalent exams was urged. The energy and efforts of students and teachers should be devoted to recovering from learning loss, rather than preparing for exams. The educational value of these exams has been questioned even before the Covid situation.

Fourth, teachers needed support and incentive to implement learning recovery. Guidelines and orientation should be provided to schools and teachers regarding the implementation of a learning recovery plan, especially on: a) use of rapid assessment of grade-level student preparedness; b) pedagogic approaches for assisting students using results of the rapid assessment; c) instructional planning to focus on core competencies aiming to help students

become self-reliant learners; and d) providing socio-emotional support to students and communicating with both students and parents. Online platforms should be used extensively for the guidance and orientation of teachers, as well as to complement classroom teaching for the students.

This urgent appeal, however, has not been heeded by the authorities. Their single-minded aim has been to go back to the old routine, with less attention to how this affects students' learning and wellbeing. The decision-makers have not been moved by the warning that without the proposed steps most students would not be able to keep up with their grade level lessons, that their deficits would be cumulative and that they would be harmed permanently.

The 2022 academic year has begun according to the old calendar, but only partially, and the threat of another shutdown looms large. A rethinking of the current plan and introducing a three-year rescue and recovery plan are still in order.

Concluding comments
The pandemic has been an unprecedented global crisis, not just for the education sector. An extraordinary situation demands an exceptional and

bold response. It does not make sense to presume that the education machine could be restarted where it was left off in March 2020, as if the intervening 18 months did not matter.

The World Bank, UNESCO, and UNICEF have proposed a pathway to recovery, noted above, which emphasises three broad priorities: bringing all children back to schools safely, recovering learning losses, and preparing and supporting teachers. These are in line with our educationists' recommendation as well as the suggestions emerging from other studies and discourses involving the academia, education advocates and civil society, such as, the Campaign for Popular Education and the Education Watch Report, Brac Institute of Governance Studies, Civil Society Alliance and others. They entail breaking down the broad objectives and the plans into targets, mechanisms and activities, which could not be discussed in this article.

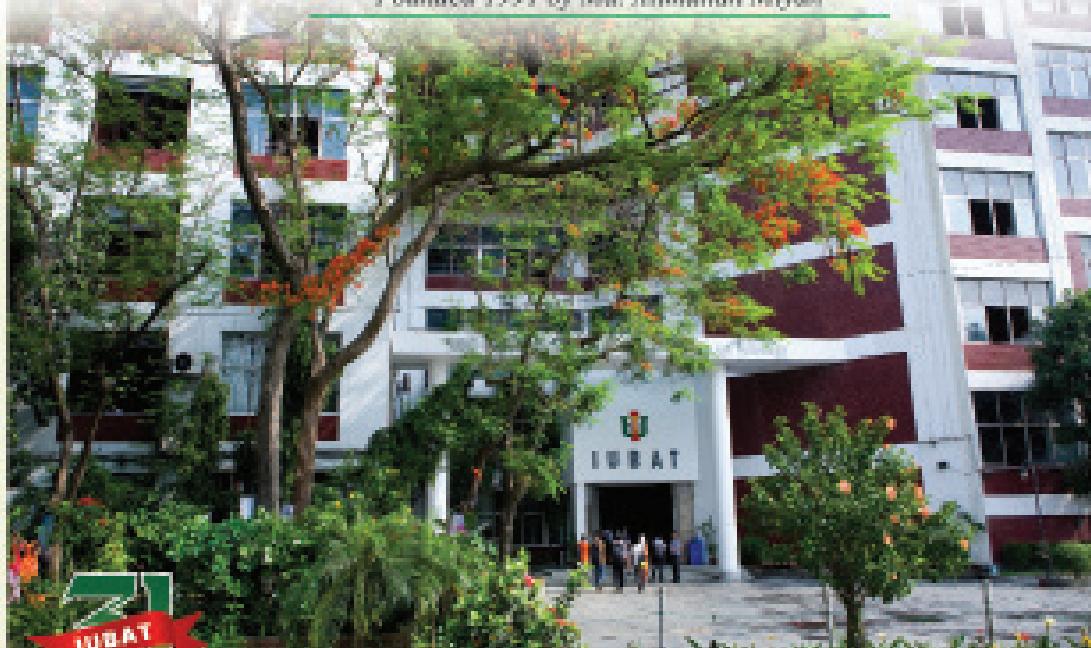
The educationists' statement invoked the National Education Policy 2010 and its proposal for a permanent statutory education commission to guide and oversee education reform efforts to build a consensus on priorities and strategies, and guide and monitor the education reform efforts (MOE, 2010). Moving forward with both urgent and longer-term measures depends on agreeing on the agenda for action and taking the necessary steps resolutely. A permanent commission, comprising the right people and empowered by political backing, may be the way to steer the critical recovery effort.

References:

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- World Bank, UNICEF, UNESCO (2021). The State of the Global Education Crisis – A Path to Recovery, December, 2021.
- The Daily Star*, "Four urgent steps to put students on track for learning," September 25, 2021.

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