

Rate of stimulus disbursement disgraceful

Are we to believe there are no eligible beneficiaries in the country?

We are shocked that the government has spent only about 0.5 percent of a Tk-1,500-crore stimulus package unveiled in 2020 for the laid-off workers of export-oriented apparel and leather factories. The programme was launched with money from the European Union and Germany in October 2020, amid a global outcry that around a million Bangladeshi workers had already been fired or furloughed due to cancelled or reduced orders from international brands and retailers, according to a survey of factory owners by the Penn State Center for Global Workers' Rights. It is thus inconceivable that, despite the urgent and bleak situation on the ground, so little of the funds has been disbursed over the last one and a half years.

What is even more staggering is the reason cited by the sources behind such a slow disbursement: apparently, the labour ministry is yet to finalise a list of workers eligible for the benefits. The director general of the Department of Labour claims it is "difficult to find such workers." We wonder: Why is it such a mammoth and impossible task to find eligible workers? Do the export-oriented factories, which are supposed to keep extensive records for their auditors and suppliers—or the owners' associations, for that matter—not have documentation of the workers who were laid off? Do the labour unions not have a list of aggrieved workers? Or does the DG mean that no workers were actually laid off during the Covid-19 pandemic?

It isn't just eligible factory workers that the government can't locate. In 2020, the government took up a Tk-2,500-crore scheme to distribute free food among the poor people in April-June. But it is yet to spend two-thirds of the money, because they can't find people eligible for the benefits. Meanwhile, seven other stimulus schemes launched in 2020 have seen little progress. Only 60 percent of the money has been spent as of November last year.

What exactly are we missing? According to various estimates, the fallout from the pandemic created somewhere between 17.5 and 20 million new poor in Bangladesh in 2020 alone. The second lockdown in the country pushed an estimated 32 million people into poverty, according to a survey conducted between April 2020 and August 2021 by the Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC) and Brac Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD). We can quote more statistics to highlight the growing desperation of lower-income people, but the government, we assume, is well aware of the depressing data. What we demand from various government agencies is an explanation of why they have failed so miserably to reach the people they were supposed to support. If our agencies are so ill-equipped to disburse the funds, why announce stimulus packages in the first place?

The government's performance in this regard has been embarrassing, and we urge the authorities to immediately look into the lacklustre attitude of its implementation agencies and take steps to ensure that the funds reach the deserving beneficiaries.

Unfit vehicles, unaccountable authorities

When will the govt own up to its consistent failure?

RECENT data from the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) has laid bare, once again, just how unsafe our roads are. As stated in a report by this daily, a staggering 508,000 registered vehicles, which are eligible for fitness tests, have not renewed their documents as of last month. Meanwhile, at least a million registered vehicles are being driven by unlicensed drivers—an equally major cause for concern. It seems to have become a ghastly tradition for us to demand safer roads in this column, and it all seems in vain. Over the years, as the situation has worsened, the authorities have not even done the bare minimum—such as properly enforcing the Road Transport Act, 2018—to make our roads safe.

According to police data, at least 5,088 people were killed in 5,472 road crashes in 2021; these figures rose by 29.86 percent and 30.34 percent, respectively, from what they were in 2020. Of course, data from road safety organisations show these numbers to be much higher. While the closure of BRTA offices during the Covid lockdown may justify a lower number of registered vehicles, it's also true that irresponsibility exists on the parts of BRTA as well as the drivers. For one, though the BRTA issued more than 3.76 million driving licences against nearly 4.78 million registered vehicles till June last year—indicating that more than a million vehicles are being driven by unlicensed drivers—it is also true that many drivers acquire multiple licences for light and heavy vehicles. Many also operate using fake licences, and this has been motivated by the BRTA extending the time for delivering licence cards several times over the past two years.

The BRTA chairman resorting to shifting responsibility on the police, when asked if actions were being taken against unfit vehicles and unlicensed drivers by its mobile courts, further concerns us as to whether the organisation is truly working towards fixing these issues on its own.

If the relevant government bodies are skirting around their responsibilities, it certainly paints a bleak picture for the future of road safety in Bangladesh. All we can do—once again—is urge the government and those tasked with making our roads safer to work together and bring down these morbid numbers, instead of shifting blames while lives are prematurely lost daily.

Farewell VC, Welcome CEO



SHAMSAD MORTUZA

BLOWN' IN THE WIND

Dr Shamsad Mortuza is the pro-vice-chancellor of the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB).

A colleague teaching abroad recently called to ask, "What's the minimum criteria for becoming a vice-chancellor in Bangladesh? Can one be a vice-chancellor without any teaching experience whatsoever?" A certain high-level academic appointment of an entrepreneur drew his attention.

Equating a university vice-chancellor (VC) with the chief executive officer (CEO) of a university is becoming a marketing trend for institutions that view students as consumers. Especially in some of the newer universities in the UK that prioritise internationalisation as their major revenue source, the traditional title of a VC is being replaced by a CEO. For them, the term means little outside the academia, and they have trouble explaining the job titles to their counterparts in China, for example. They have opted for a title that corresponds with the responsibilities and nature of their institutions. To reverse the pattern is another ballgame and has confused many, including my colleague.

His quizzing on the drift from tradition makes me revisit the root of the word "chancellor." The dictionary dates it back to the Middle English word *chanceler*, which means a chief administrative officer of a ruler, while the Late Latin root *cancellarius* implies a secretary or a doorkeeper. Seen thus, the application of the term chancellor to denote the chief executive officer of a university or campus is a valid proposition. In Bangladesh, the post is mostly ceremonial as the president of the country is the chancellor of all universities. He is the ultimate gatekeeper of over 150 public and private universities. In the case of the only international women's university in the country, the chancellor is the wife of a former British premier and the VC is nominated by the university's Board of Trustees. While the chancellor selects his representative—the Latin prefix "vice—" means "in place of"—for all universities in Bangladesh, in AUW's case, its independent Board of Trustees makes the choice.

The difference in institutional orientations has probably caused confusion. Then again, can the post of a VC be devoid of the academic remit of teaching experience, curriculum preparation, and research publications required by an institution that delivers higher education? It's justified only when we restrict the job of a university head as the chief executive to the administrative tasks of managing a university. The post, however, demands a combination of administrative and academic acumen.

In case of the recent appointment, the magic wand of a Doctor of Philosophy can be waved to show a seal of approval. The trend is increasingly becoming prominent among the universities for professionals where the PhD degree is pursued by many aspirant academics as a career move. Many unformed men are now pursuing PhDs as there is a rapid growth of military universities. Ironically, the administrative focus on education has made the government appoint VCs without PhDs. The recent turmoil at the Shahjalal University of Science and Technology (SUST) has exposed the issue. Earlier, we had a number of University Grants Commission (UGC) chairs without doctoral degrees. A PhD, of course, is just a degree and not the ultimate litmus test of one's scholarly pedigree. But it involves long periods of rigorous training, where scholars identify the knowledge gap in their fields before pitching their ideas (theses) to make significant contributions to the existing knowledge.

This is highly important as the

government has repeatedly underlined a knowledge-based economy for the overall growth of the country. The compromises that we are seeing at the academic administrative roles undermine the proposition. It is symptomatic of an anti-academic culture as well as the corporatisation of education. The former is promoted by the successful innovators who are school drop-outs, who have

three-track education has benefitted one class of students who are more in tune with these suggested innovations. In the process, the practised education system is widening the social gap. We are becoming comfortable with a madrasa student becoming a religious cleric, a Bangla medium student a BCS officer, and an English Medium student a corporate boss. I know I am guilty of



Business-minded education is forcing us to forgo many of our cherished values.

PHOTO: JOSHUA HOEHNE/UNSPASH

apparently leveraged their freedom from tradition-bound institutions to change the world. No wonder, Facebook has become a proxy book, and Apple's logo has a bite at the fruit of knowledge.

The celebration of anti-intellectualism in the mass media is related to commodified information that is used to manufacture consent. It is said that during the military regime, academic session jam was used as a controlling device to stop graduates from adding to the prevalent long list of unemployed youth. The rhetoric has changed. Today, we expect our graduates to create their own jobs as there are not many out there. "Be an entrepreneur" is the mantra that we chant.

The business-minded education is forcing us to forgo many of our cherished values. This occurred to me when we invited a leading businessman to give a motivational talk for our students. He made no secret of the spurious means he adopted to be successful. He was a man of action with a proven track record of material success, which is miles away from the pursuit of an idea for an academic degree. He has the charisma to become the role model for the next generation. In an article published in the *Journal of Business Ethics*, provocatively titled, "The Impact of Anti-Intellectualism Attitudes and Academic Self-Efficacy on Business Students' Perceptions of Cheating," Rafik Elias writes, "At universities, student anti-intellectualism has resulted in the social acceptability of cheating on schoolwork, especially in the business schools, a manifestation of ethically expedient cognitive dissonance rather than of academic critical thinking."

The academic focus has shifted to "cognitive dissonance," where students are asked to deal with the discomfort triggered by their beliefs that clash with anything new or contradictory; they are asked to find a way to mitigate the contradiction to reduce their discomfort. It's a problem-solving model. In theory, such pragmatism is fine. In reality, our students don't have the necessary foundation of literacy and numeracy skills to pursue such a model manufactured in the West. We replicated the system without nurturing the very foundation of our education system: the primary and the secondary. The

oversimplification and overgeneralisation. But I believe that only individuals with personal initiatives are able to break such stereotypes.

A close look at the way our educational focus has changed in the last three decades after the introduction of private universities, with mostly business majors at the helm, will give you an idea of why and how the core values of our education have changed. Initially, there was a massive social and cultural resistance to the privatisation of education. Thanks to the World Bank-funded quality assurance programme, the public system has followed suit as well.

In the name of academic transparency and excellence, new ranking and accreditation criteria are set. Education, like other sectors, now requires investment to earn the badges of recognition. The academic administrators are under constant pressure to make their institutions profitable, so that they can take benefit of all the international best practices to refurbish their institutional images. For a private university, student tuition fees are the "only" sources of revenue. For the public, the purse string is tied to the government. The success barometer of public university VCs depends on how much money they can bring to campus for "development" by using their political connections—how many departments they can open to facilitate their party members. We are after numbers. We are spreading thin. We boast the stellar results of our students without acknowledging that the system is producing many high school graduates who lack the basic knowledge and skills and are unprepared for university-level reading. We have 1.3 million students ready to enter the tertiary system, yet the fear is that there are not enough quality institutions to accommodate them. Many of the better students will migrate to OECD countries due to the lack of opportunities here.

Something is rotten in our education system. We need an education policy that reviews and reassesses the very purpose of education. We need visionary guidance, not managerial skills. The latter can give temporary relief or a cosmetic facelift, but the deep-seated wound will not heal.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Are we to starve to death?

Lately, there have been many news reports about how the prices of daily essentials are rising. And on top of it, the government is planning to raise gas, water and electricity prices. Is anyone bothered about the fact that many households in Bangladesh are already struggling to make ends meet? My husband, who used to work in a small business firm, lost his job last year because his company was going through financial crisis due to Covid-19. He never managed to get a decent job. We have a family of five. Everyone knows how difficult it is to live in Dhaka with no means of decent

earnings. Our savings are all gone. We haven't received any support from the government either, even though we heard there were funds for people like us. We're already stretched thin. If food and utility prices are raised in this situation, how are we going to survive? Do I have to choose between paying bills and putting food on the table for my children? Can someone in the government take pity on people like us?

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