

Technicalities mustn’t get in the way of free press

Govt should empower the media, not clip its wings

THE information minister has said that newspapers are not permitted to broadcast talk shows and videos on their online platforms “as per their declarations”, and that “we will take immediate action against them” for the supposed violations. We cannot help but be alarmed by such remarks given the challenges that already surround the free press in Bangladesh. This fixation on what newspapers can or cannot do follows a “rich” tradition of inhibiting legislation on the newspaper industry, and even gives public utterance to the antagonism in which the state often appeared to stand towards the free press, more so in recent years than ever before.

For traditional media outlets, digital media is not a separate entity, but a vast, new space created through technology. Like all other industries, newspapers too are adapting to the technological changes and challenges of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, and serving readers 24/7. Digital expansion is nothing but a new distribution channel for newspapers. Global surveys show that readers are hungry for content, but they increasingly prefer to consume news from the digital space, either directly from websites or from social media. Every newspaper in the world is transforming itself to stay relevant to readers and survive financially. If it’s a patron of free press, the information ministry needs to have a reality check first, before deciding on what it can do to help.

The question of whether newspapers can or cannot publish digital content (like videos) on their websites is a technicality that we fear is being weaponised to further restrict the space for journalists. The argument that they cannot is legally tenuous, morally unsound, and technically counter-intuitive as it contrasts the free, democratic nature of the digital ecosystem. Today, there is hardly any newspaper that doesn’t have Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube accounts. The ability to use them has thrown a much-needed lifeline to legacy newspapers struggling in this digital age. Restricting their use does not just go against the freedom of the press and people’s right to information, but also against time itself. It also flies in the face of the so-called digital advancement the government is proud to have achieved.

We urge the government to refrain from pursuing such policies. Regulating the media is one thing; clipping its wings in the name of regulation is a totally different thing. We already have more media laws and rules than perhaps needed—with still more in the offing—but not one of them could withstand scrutiny by experts. The government should focus on rectifying those to make them media-friendly, instead of trying to subjugate it to further restrictions.

If kids aren’t safe at home, where will they be?

Study reveals a disturbing picture of child abuse in households

THE non-profit Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF) has come up with a shocking revelation that about 95.8 percent of children in the country are victims of violence in their own homes. This is more than the violence they face in their educational institutions or at the community level. A whopping 86.9 percent of the children surveyed said they had faced physical violence in the name of punitive action within the households. What’s more shocking is that around 81 percent of guardians were found to be supportive of physical punishment when a child is disobedient. This situation is worrying, to say the least, and if we cannot change the mindsets of parents and guardians towards children, it will have long-term detrimental effects on their wellbeing.

Children in Bangladesh face various forms of violence; sexual violence is the cruellest of them. Organisations working on child rights have done various studies and surveys that reveal a horrendous picture of sexual abuse in the country. A majority of children become victims of sexual abuse by close relatives or neighbours. The MJF survey also found that 55 percent of children face sexual violence at home. Moreover, the percentage of children facing emotional, physical and sexual abuse at schools and colleges as well as workplaces for working children is also quite high, according to the study.

The children surveyed by MJF said they did not report these issues to their parents because they were afraid of being unfairly judged. This indicates the sheer lack of awareness among parents in general about the issue of child abuse inside households. If children have to hide incidents of abuse or violence from their parents – who are supposed to have their best interests in mind – how will they learn to speak up if/when they face such things outside their homes?

Therefore, in order to ensure a safe environment for children, we must take a firm, united stand by involving families, communities, schools, as well as all sections of society. While the country’s elected representatives must ensure that child rights are protected by implementing the relevant laws, the agencies and organisations working on child rights must also play their part by forming community-based committees, appointing social workers and volunteers in the communities to raise awareness of the issue and the need to protect children. It is only through proactive and well-focused measures that we can ensure a safe environment for children everywhere.

If you pay peanuts, you get monkeys



BLOWIN’ IN THE WIND
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THE old cliché used in the title has many opponents; not too many people are convinced that money is the only factor to get skilled or efficient workers. Peanuts, in this context, is slang for low wages, and monkeys imply stupidity, and by extension, unskilled workers. A seminal essay published by the *Economic Policy* in 2011, however, upheld the phrase to suggest that when it comes to education, there is a significant link between teachers’ pay and pupils’ performance.

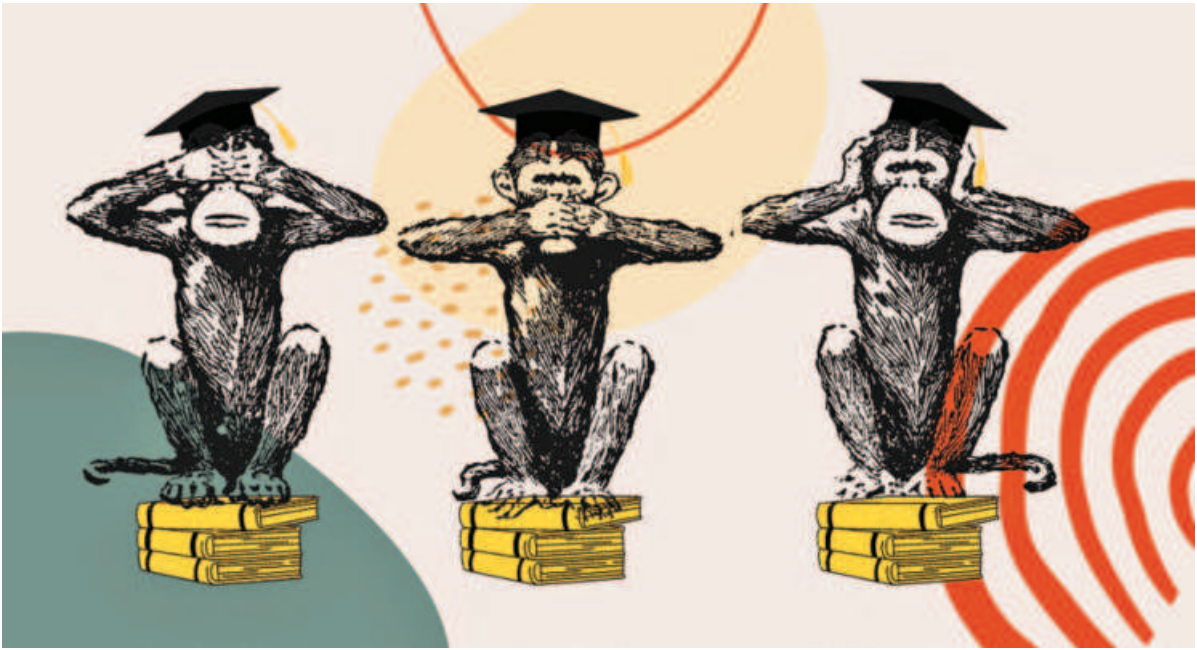
The authors of the article, Dr Dolton and Marcenaro-Gutierrez, begin with a simple question: “Why are teachers paid up to four times as much in some countries compared to others, and does it matter?” They observe that some of the best-performing education systems, such as in Finland and South Korea, recruit their teachers from the top third of their graduate cohort. Using aggregated data from 39 OECD countries over 10 years, the study argues that the relative wage in teaching determines the ability, and hence the quality of teachers the country gets. “If teachers are paid in the top 20 percent of the earnings distribution of a country, then one would expect that this profession would attract some of the most able graduates in the country. Likewise, if teaching is really poorly paid in relative terms, then one would expect that only the less able would end up in the job.” The study shows that a 15 percent increase in teachers’ pay would give rise to around a 6-8 percent increase in pupils’ performance.

But there is a catch. This increase is not necessarily for the existing stock of teachers. An automatic pay increase will not necessarily turn the current teachers into better teachers. There should be additional incentives for them to undertake continuous professional development and in-service training to measure up to the higher pay. It would take 30-40 years to complete the cycle to replace the existing stock with better recruits. The article contends that the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers.

With so much talk on education as the next “megaproject” of the government, reiterated by the education minister in a post-budget briefing, I think policymakers should focus on quality teachers at all levels of education in Bangladesh – primary, secondary and tertiary. However, the moment the term “megaproject” is used, a mega concern bursts into the scene. We get worried by the trajectory of the ongoing “development” practice that focuses on bricks and mortars, land acquisition, overseas consultancy,

bureaucrats, and middlemen. Let us, therefore, be wary of the monkey business in identifying the elephant in the room: we need the right people for the right job. We need to make the right investment to get the right teachers for the right education. The same rule perhaps applies to other professional groups. It is not healthy to have a cadre officer with a

skills is allowing expatriate workers from our neighbouring countries to siphon billions of dollars from the NGO, banking, and RMG sectors. It would be interesting to compare the remittance sent in by our unskilled workers with the one sent out by skilled expats. Education, both formal and informal, is the only remedy that can bridge the gap. And for that, we will need



▲ VISUAL: STAR

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background in humanities call the shots in the health ministry, for example. With limited resources available to Bangladesh’s education sector in the proposed budget, it is even more pertinent that we strategise. The proposed Tk 81,449 crore education budget is 12 percent of the total budget. Its share in the GDP is 1.83 percent, significantly lower than the prescribed six percent. Already, the budget has been criticised for not paying the necessary focus on Covid-19 recovery and for its attempt to camouflage the information technology budget under its purview to look good on paper. The proposal to increase teachers’ pay for quality education is, therefore, going to be an anathema to the policymakers. As an English teacher, who has been involved in public and private universities, I can reflect on my field to defend my position. I was intrigued by a newspaper article by Prof Obaidul Hamid of the University of Queensland, who referred to the recently published English Proficiency Index to tell us, “Bangladesh was placed in the low proficiency category and was ranked 65th, ahead of Vietnam (66th) and behind Nepal (62nd), Ethiopia (63rd) and Pakistan (63rd). Lebanon (34th), China (49th) and Iran (58th) were ahead of Bangladesh, in the moderate proficiency group. Except for Singapore (4th) and South Africa (12th), the very high proficiency group comprising 13 countries was dominated by European countries, led by the Netherlands (1st) and Austria (2nd).” Our inefficiency in communication

the right educators. Prof Hamid’s own research shows that many students are acquiring English language skills from the internet in the absence of support services in school. This is also true for China and Saudi Arabia. We need expert teachers who can gear the primary and secondary students to the best practices. Clearly, the existing stock has failed for a whole gamut of reasons, including the retirement of experienced teachers, insufficient knowledge, poorly designed textbooks, a convoluted language policy, politicisation, insufficient training, paltry pay – the list goes on. The government has done a remarkable job in spreading education and in making education accessible to all. Programmes like free textbooks, meal for school children, and uniform budget are laudable. But tempted by the number game, we often compromise quality. It is time to bring good teachers to the classroom; the rest will follow. How do I know? Look at some of the top private universities that are in their 20s and 30s. Already, some of them have outpaced the age-old public universities in different quality measures. These universities pay handsome salaries to attract faculty members with foreign degrees, prompting a reverse brain drain. They also utilise the expertise of senior retired professors. And then there are other private universities that probably pay Tk 10,000 to a university lecturer, and are guilty of selling certificates. Indeed, if you pay peanuts, you get monkeys.

Can university assessment make graduates more employable?

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THE Covid-19 pandemic has transformed almost every aspect of our lives. It has had a profound effect on the skills and competencies that labour markets require of graduates by accelerating the adoption of digital tools and increasing the demand for digital content. At the same time, the imperative to social distancing has made it impractical for universities to assess students using traditional methods, leading institutions to experiment with a variety of alternative assessment instruments. Nevertheless, universities can greatly enhance the employability of their graduates by strategically investing in some elements of these alternative assessment innovations.

The unseen exam was the mainstay of university assessment prior to the pandemic, and with good reason. The anonymised nature of exams creates a level playing field on which student work can be fairly evaluated. The unseen paper allows institutions to test the ability of students to apply what has been learnt to an unfamiliar context. The process of preparing for an exam teaches students to manage and retain information. The closed nature of the exam hall enables the institution to prevent collusion, personation, plagiarism, and other forms of academic misconduct. The time-limited nature of exams not only teaches students time management, but also

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how to cope with stress in high-pressure environments. Despite these important advantages, a major weakness of the unseen exam is the limited relevance of the assessment mode to real-life situations. As many generations of students have wryly observed, it is difficult to think of a situation in which an employer would oblige an employee to answer pre-prepared questions in an empty room without access to any notes or other resources. For this reason, even before the pandemic, universities used presentations and reports to complement the unseen exam with assessment modes that honed skills valued in the labour market. The demands of the labour market are constantly changing, and so are the relative importance of different skills. It is widely accepted that the pandemic has increased the premium that labour markets place on digital competencies and proficiencies. So, while the ability to conduct a presentation in a boardroom remains an invaluable skill, in the post-pandemic digital economy, this skill must be complemented by the ability to simultaneously manage the live-streaming of that presentation to an online, remote audience. In addition to traditional assessment modes, we should also be asking students to submit their academic work in the form of podcasts, videos and blogs, aligning our curriculum more closely to a post-pandemic digital age. An important advantage of using these formats is the ease with which they can be leveraged by students to create

a portfolio for potential employers. It is straightforward to upload a video or a podcast from an assessment to YouTube or other publicly accessible platforms in a way that can easily be highlighted on CVs and LinkedIn profiles. Universities that are early adopters of these innovative assessment modes would enable their students to differentiate their CVs in an increasingly competitive graduate labour market. As with any innovation, the adoption of new assessment modes comes with an element of risk. The main purpose of assessment is to provide a barometer of student learning. With videos and podcasts, however, slick production technologies can have a disproportionate effect on the perceived quality of the submission. As a result, those grading will need to be vigilant to prioritise substance over style when deliberating over submissions. Rumours of the demise of the unseen exam are greatly exaggerated. Compared to other assessment instruments, exams provide an exceptionally reliable and robust barometer of learning. For this reason, they should remain an indispensable part of a university’s assessment portfolios. But universities should leave their degrees with other, more innovative and employment-relevant forms of assessment. Reports and presentations will continue to play an important role in assessments. But so should blogs, videos and podcasts, too, the prominence of which have increased dramatically in the post-pandemic digital economy.