FILE PHOTO: STAR

A centralised university admission system can only be as good as the institutions it serves.

Mind the gap in centralised university admissions

BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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SHAMSAD MORTUZA

The University Grants Commission (UGC) in Bangladesh recently unveiled the draft of the Central Admission Examination Authority Ordinance for the 2023-24 academic year. This ordinance is poised to revolutionise university admissions across the country, bringing all universities—including those that have historically resisted the cluster system in favour of institutional autonomy—under the umbrella of a National Testing Authority.

During a meeting with university vice-chancellors, acting UGC chair Muhammed Alamgir announced this groundbreaking ordinance, expressing hope that institutions would heed the chancellor's desire and align their admission policies with the proposed changes. Currently, 32 public universities conduct admission tests within three clusters: general and science and technology universities, agricultural universities, and engineering universities. The new ordinance seeks to include five major universities, namely Dhaka University, Chittagong University, Rajshahi University, Jahangirnagar University, and Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (Buet), in the centralised student enrolment mechanism for their undergraduate programmes.

The UGC chief cited the chancellor's vision probably to mitigate any resistance from the top public universities regarding a standardised testing system. Protective of their prestige of being autonomous bodies, these universities pursued independence in assessing individual applicants, believing that a centralised system might have limited predictive abilities. The Islamic University and Jagannath University also initially tried to distance themselves from the cluster examination. Some other universities adopted a different path and introduced internal oral examinations to select their own candidates. The new ordinance aims to harmonise universities on a common platform and streamline the student selection process.

In theory, the idea of a centralised university admission system is commendable. It eliminates the need for admission seekers to visit multiple campuses and pay several admission fees. Furthermore, it facilitates universities in transparently and efficiently selecting deserving candidates. However, the practical implementation of this method has revealed significant shortcomings, as exemplified by the lack of a central academic calendar for all universities.

The UGC has insisted on a semester system in which you can have intakes in January and June terms. However, the Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) examination results of 2022 were published in February 2023, and subsequently the cluster admission tests were conducted in May. By the time the admission process, including migrations, concluded on September 24, there were still 2,100 vacant seats. Many public universities failed to meet their student enrolment targets, resulting in publication of as many as seven waiting lists to fill vacant seats. This is ironic, given that more than 15 students were competing for each available seat within the public system. In the 2022-23 academic year, 303,231 students applied for 21,218 seats in the general and science and technology cluster, according to a RisingBD report.

The number of vacant seats in several universities underscores a disturbing reality: students are disinterested in certain institutions and programmes. This raises questions about whether a centralised exam can effectively achieve its purpose when universities exhibit disparities. The fact that students prefer to leave seats unfilled rather than join specific universities or programmes suggests a substantial mismatch between student aspirations and institutional offerings. This disparity is a pressing issue, given that these institutions are largely subsidised by taxpayers' contributions.

Conversely, top private universities have experienced significant growth in their fall intake. The increase in student enrolment at private universities can be seen as a consequence of the shortcomings in the public system. Many of the newer public universities lack the resources for teaching and research, making them less attractive to students. In an emerging economy, parents from the growing middle class tend to prefer sending their children to top private universities in pursuit of quality education. Those who can afford it are also seeking admission in overseas universities. The issue is multifaceted, and a centralised testing system offers a bureaucratic solution that doesn't fully address the complexity of the problem.

For a centralised admission system to be effective, participating universities must be on the same level in terms of competitiveness, prestige, and academic excellence. It's unrealistic to expect a single examination to bridge the disparities in quality and reputation among universities. While a centralised exam can help identify the most capable students, it cannot instantaneously make a subpar university more appealing.

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In a country where the tertiary education system comprises students from Bangla, English and madrasa streams, addressing these issues requires a comprehensive approach. Firstly, public and private universities must align their policies and expectations within the framework of a centralised admission system to eliminate inconsistencies and reduce the burden on students. Secondly, universities should enhance the quality and relevance of their programmes to attract students genuinely interested in their offerings, all while adhering to the international standards of meritocracy.

The empty seats serve as a silent protest against the uneven growth of higher education in Bangladesh. A centralised university admission system can only be as good as the institutions it serves. If universities are not at par in terms of their academic quality, infrastructure and faculty, it is unrealistic to expect that a single entrance exam will resolve these disparities. Thus, the responsibility falls on the universities themselves to adapt and improve, with the ultimate goal of creating a system where every student, regardless of the university they attend, can pursue their chosen field of study and receive an education that equips them for the future.

More than only economic outcomes of education

EDUCATING EDUCATION

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"Lekhapora kore je, gari ghora chore shey" is a phrase with a history. It's a phrase that in one line depicts what it is that we expect from education. Although its origins are unclear, it makes sense that it would be the main mantra in times when there was widespread poverty. Indeed, education was, and remains, a tunnel to livelihoods. Is it time, in this age of high-rise buildings and mega development, to be mindful of such a phrase still running the show?

Today, the main focus of our education system—to most of us, that is—is for students to be equipped with employable skills so that they can get "good" jobs, earn a living and, ideally, contribute to the country's economic growth. The day has, however, come when we ask ourselves: is education only about earning money? Is that why we read literature and learn about history as well as maths and science? My deepest fear is that our dominant focus on the economic outcomes of education will lead to the elimination of the part of education that feeds our souls and not just our skills. I once went to a seminar where a private university faculty suggested that our universities should stop teaching "arts and humanities" subjects—the arts don't bring in the money, BBAs do, more so than even doctors these days. I was scared, and you should be too.

If you think about it, what purpose we let drive our narrative for education holds a powerful spell over us and shapes how we structure our curriculum, and our education system. What is our future if we have many well-earning, high-status, job-attained "*gari chora*" individuals who don't think twice before littering the streets, before taking a bribe in exchange for a favour, before harming others for their own profits? Profits have no ends, especially when we humans lose sight of humanity, and although education cannot make a difference alone, it remains one of the most effective weapons at our disposal in this fight for a much-needed change in our mindsets and narratives.

The key lies in changing what we expect from an education. Realising this, there is a large and growing literature now on the non-economic outcomes of education from around the world. To put it simply, there are economic and non-economic benefits of education, where economic outcomes are mostly to do with employment and GDP, and non-economic outcomes are to do with outcomes beyond the economic matters—better environments, lesser crime, more democracy, safety on our streets, among others. Part of my PhD work focuses on delving beyond economic outcomes of education, and I argue for the inclusion of non-economic outcomes in our approach to education. This means, above everything, that I want education to mean more than just earnings. I want it to equate to enlightenment—or at least that we aim for such.

No, we cannot do without earnings in this age of capitalism and money-oriented living, but nobody can deny that a world with just economic development and no societal moral integrity is not much of a world worth living in. While we see education as a means to eradicate physical poverty, we must remember that it has the potential to rid us of emotional and moral poverty too, and sadly, we may very well be in a crisis and shortage of morality already.

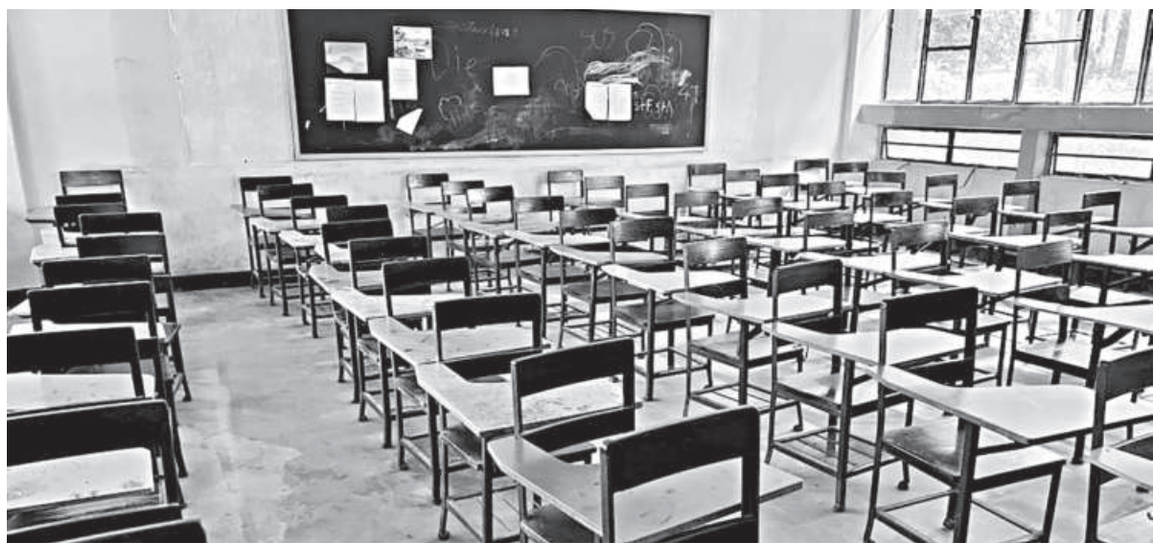
We need to design our education to be more holistic—to include ways that help students become more civically engaged, responsible and kinder human beings. On the one hand, we need to figure out what works: how do we redesign our education to make sure that what we aim for translates into real change? How do we ascertain that making kindness a larger focus of our education actually makes individuals become kinder towards others?

These are questions I think about in my PhD, but constantly come to the realisation that education alone cannot do wonders. If we do not comprehensively, as a society, change what we value, any change that we make in our education system will not be able to magically make a difference. Consider, for example, how each of our textbooks in the general stream, from Class 1 to Class 10, has a quote on the back—sometimes about honesty, sometimes about patriotism. If our children see dishonesty everywhere around them, if they see dishonesty being rewarded, if they learn from real life that profit at the cost of honesty is the "smart" choice, how can we ever expect a mere quote on the back of their textbook to make a mark on their minds? We cannot.

We need to rethink our entire education system, from its purpose to what we include in our textbooks. We need social work activities to be a part of our curriculum where students get to engage with homeless children, where they get to visit slums and rural villages. We need school programmes that teach students about trees, plants and our soil. We need anti-littering initiatives and cleaning campaigns. We need our parents, teachers and all stakeholders to get on board with redefining the purposes that education is meant to serve.

We wouldn't be the first nation to implement such ideas. Seeing Japanese people picking up trash, not only after themselves but also after others, when they finish watching a world cup match in the stadium—education has a role to play in the development of this attitude. In Africa, the "Ubuntu" worldview influences individuals to adopt a collective and community-based orientation in their communities, and so they value, as priceless qualities, helping each other and progressing together in unity.

We need to find our own Ubuntu. We need a peak in social consciousness, and not just in our GDP. A widespread social consciousness where individuals are sensitive to ethical, moral and humanitarian issues, where they recognise the impact of their actions on others and on the broader community, where they behave with empathy and compassion and advocate for fairness, equality, and justice. A social consciousness that, ultimately, fosters a collective effort to create a more just and compassionate world for all. We need to reshape our education system so that it delivers not just skilled human capital, but skilled human beings with social consciousness. Undeniably, education is the way that a society articulates its values—the way that it transmits its values. So, what do we value?



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FILE PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Like better
7 School member
11 Bring back
12 Opposed to
13 Made level
14 Middling grades
15 More confident
16 Michener book
17 Match parts
18 Serve a sentence
19 Shortly
21 Was a pioneer
22 Rat ridder
25 Chess piece
26 Retro style
27 Forge sights
29 Folder features
33 Like cacti
34 Standup guy?
35 Allude to
36 Hair goop
37 Phone button letters
38 Warring woman
39 Try out
40 Respectable

DOWN
1 Printer's need
2 Variety show
3 Tennis star Chris
4 Diplomacy
5 At any time
6 Stop signal
7 Diamond side
8 Banished
9 Traveling trunk
10 Sounded snaky
16 Bar mixer
18 Ninnies
20 In a surprising way
22 Syrinx
23 Asks
24 View from Mount Vernon
25 Team symbol
28 Sluggish
30 Astonish
31 Try to get, in a way
32 Bouquet
34 Show up
36 Small tablet

10-8

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

A	C	T	O	R	■	M	A	J	A	S
T	H	E	R	E	■	A	R	E	N	A
E	A	S	E	L	■	N	I	F	T	Y
A	N	S	■	E	S	S	■	F	E	Y
S	E	A	■	A	L	E	■	R	U	E
E	L	T	O	R	O	■	P	E	P	S
■	■	H	U	N	G	A	R	Y	■	■
S	C	O	T	■	G	R	O	W	L	S
H	A	M	■	M	E	T	■	R	O	W
A	M	P	■	O	D	E	■	I	N	E
M	E	S	A	S	■	M	A	G	N	A
E	R	O	D	E	■	I	M	H	I	T
S	A	N	D	S	■	S	A	T	E	S