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FATIMA JAHAN
ENA

OPINION

The need for diverse scholarships beyond sports

ZIBA MAHDI

A sports quota has recently been introduced in Dhaka University, which is reportedly aiming to improve the quality of sports in the university and produce potential players to represent Bangladesh both nationally and internationally. The candidates are assessed through verbal and practical examinations by a committee before being considered for admission. Sheikh Morsalin from the national football team, Ritu Porna Chakma from the women's football team, and Towhid Hridoy from the national cricket team were all selected under the quota this year.

Efforts to nurture athletic talent haven't been limited to universities only; the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) had introduced scholarships for their school cricket tournament back in 2022. This prompts the question: why limit scholarships and quotas to sports?

The harsh truth is that Bangladesh's obsession with academics have gotten it nowhere; even the best universities here are unable to break into the top 100 in Asia, let alone the world. While a host of socioeconomic issues can be blamed for the poor quality of education, the rigidity of the curriculum and its inability to let any non-academic talent flourish need to be scrutinised.

Schools with resources to conduct extracurricular activities are rare, and even in those institutions the underlying consensus remains that they are merely distractions with no bearings on students' futures. The assumption is not entirely wrong. Non-academic strengths don't factor into university admissions at all, so why should students waste time and resources to hone these talents?

Contrary to popular opinion, especially in our country, extracurricular activities can and do leave a mark on students' lives. Joining clubs or taking on part-time jobs is a cheaper way to explore different career options than taking an experimental subject in O levels

and flunking out. These pursuits can also equip students with valuable skills that range from public speaking to problem-solving.

This does not necessarily mean that extracurricular activities should be an obligation or an extra burden on top of existing academic pressure. On the contrary, if someone is lacking in academic credentials, their strength in another field can make up for it. Why wouldn't prestigious institutions want to recruit talented people of different fields? After all, the father of economics was an avid believer of specialisation.

The mechanics of specialised scholarships and special quotas are slightly different, but the end goal is similar: to nurture talent.

Specialised scholarships around the world are awarded for art, music, writing, leadership, community service, and voluntary work. Some cover the full cost of four years of university including tuition, room and board while others offer a specific amount each year, which might or might not be renewable. The competition usually gets higher with the amount of amenities offered. These scholarships usually come with attached strings that require the student to continue the activity throughout the course of their undergraduate studies. Particularly risky strings are conditional scholarships that the university may choose to not renew after the first year. Scholarships can act as a great motivator and provide some weight to the activity.

Quotas may also have the arduous selection process of scholarships, even though they don't always financially incentivise the students.

Students are usually required to demonstrate excellence in their respective fields to be even considered for these opportunities. Awards from prestigious contests can provide a boost in this respect, as can proving significant time commitment. It is mentionable that the academic aspect of the

student's education isn't completely overlooked in these scenarios and more often than not, they are required to be as intellectually capable as other admitted students of the university.

Like any other well-meaning initiatives, scholarships and quotas have the potential to be abused. In fact, the new sports quota at Dhaka University isn't new at all; it is a reintroduction of the one that was scrapped in 2004

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after the revelation that students admitted under the athletic quota were actually not athletes at all. Misusing quotas in this manner is unfortunately not uncommon and it robs deserving students of their spots.

Opponents of specialised scholarships may also argue that they will give unfair advantages to financially privileged students who are able to indulge in extracurricular activities more frequently than their less privileged counterparts.

Corruption and inequality will never become extinct, but the threat of their existence shouldn't squash the potential discovery of fresh talent.

Ziba Mahdi is a student at North South University.