DHAKA THURSDAY JANUARY 16, 2025, *MAGH 2, 1431 BS* | A PUBLICATION OF The Daily Star

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ILLUSTRATION: **SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR**

MOVIES

SONIC THE HEDGEHOG 3

Racing ahead, but tripping along the way

SHAMS RASHID TONMOY

Sonic the Hedgehog has been a pop culture icon since the 90s, zipping his way into the hearts of gamers and meme enthusiasts alike. When the live-action film adaptation was first announced in 2019, fans were sceptical – and rightly so, after the infamous reveal of the original design for the titular speedster. Thankfully, the backlash led to a redesign that paved the way for a successful franchise, now three films strong, with a fourth on the way. So, how does *Sonic the Hedgehog 3* hold up?

Sonic the Hedgehog 3 dives into the story of Shadow, another speedy alien hedgehog who serves as Sonic's 'edgy' counterpart and moral foil. The new adversary is quickly seen teaming up with Sonic's arch-nemesis, Doctor Ivo Robotnik, aka Eggman, alongside a surprise new villain – Eggman's long-lost grandfather, Professor Gerald Robotnik.

However, unlike the devious Robotniks, who only have evil in their hearts, Shadow's arc explores familiar territory: Will he seek vengeance for the injustices he has suffered, or will he join Sonic in embracing heroism? While predictable, this moral dilemma is handled with enough flair to keep it engaging as the main plot point during the film's runtime.

Jim Carrey steals the show once again, playing both Eggman and Gerald Robotnik with his trademark over-the-top energy. The animation is another standout. The seamless blend of CGI and live action feels better than the previous movies, and the action sequences also seem smoother and more immersive. The film's conclusion delivers a satisfying resolution to Shadow's arc, balancing the action with emotional weight.

However, despite being a 2024 release, *Sonic the Hedgehog 3* feels oddly dated. Some of the dialogue lands firmly in the 'corny' territory. Sonic's signature trash-talking is on full display, but his brashness often teeters into unlikeability. The comedy, a cornerstone of the films, is another mixed bag.

Overall, *Sonic the Hedgehog 3* is a solid popcorn flick that delivers what fans have come to expect – quirky characters, fast-paced action, and nostalgic nods to the games. While the humour and repetitive tropes might wear thin, the strong performances and polished visuals make the film worth a watch. Not quite supersonic, but still a fun spin.

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OPINION

Looking back at the wasted potential of EDUCATIONAL REFORMS

ZIBA MAHDI

The National Education Policy 2010 is on its way out with the interim government describing it as "improper and unimplementable". In fact, most education policies that have been implemented in the past were not particularly effective. While several variables contributed to how ineffective they were, a lack of foresight and enforcement were arguably the most prominent factors.

The National Education Policy 2010, unlike its predecessors, introduced mandatory pre-primary education, launched new subjects focusing on Bangladeshi history and culture, and stated that there will be no room for physical punishment in educational institutions. Other progressive policies included promises of training teachers, expanding scholarship opportunities, and plans to increase vocational education.

In as little as five years, it was evident that the groundbreaking experiment had not taken several confounding variables into account. The ambitious scheme to extend mandatory primary education to eighth grade was halted by resource shortage and complicated by the inauguration of the Junior School Certificate (JSC) and the Primary Education Completion (PEC) exams.

While both the national exams were scrapped in 2023, they introduced their fair share of burden in the education sector. Education specialists argued that they enforced rote memorisation among young learners and commercialised education through guidebooks and mushrooming coaching centres. Toxic competition also thrived among students and their parents as they raced to get the coveted GPA 5 by whatever means possible. In the process, question leaks for primary exams became a pervasive issue. The integrity was compromised within the exam halls as well with students resorting to cheating from their peers.

Witnessing such unscrupulous practices so early on in life definitely did not do favours to impressionable young minds and their developing sense of ethics. Similarly, it had adverse effects on their self-esteem when undesirable grades were revealed, with reports emerging of students inflicting harm on themselves.

The proposed creative system of evaluation was another failed scheme. Despite the policy proposal emphasising the preceding system's fixation on rote learning, students still crammed guidebooks which had an endless supply of "creative questions". They did it hoping to face similar content in the exams.

Furthermore, many of the policies that were supposed to help teachers and seemed perfect on paper remained unimplemented. For instance, the training of teachers, that was proposed but not executed, left them perplexed and unable to adhere to the changes. In fact, they were blatantly disregarded by downgrading their salaries instead of delivering the promised increase.

However, it would not be a fair analysis without acknowledging what the 2010 policy managed to achieve. Some notable ones include the commendable initiative to provide textbooks and monthly stipends to students, which did wonders to increase school enrolments and reduce the drop-out rate. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) education was implemented from secondary to higher secondary level to fulfil the government's Digital Bangladesh dream. Women's literacy rates remained consistently high across the nation.

Nonetheless, an overhaul of the curriculum was designed in 2022, with the objective to modernise the current system. No tests until third grade, no public exams until the tenth grade, and timed exams replaced with year-end evaluations were some of the radical changes the administration proposed. Most of them were met with mixed reviews. While the new assessment process did take some pressure off students, parents and teachers remained sceptical.

The efficacy of educational policies is not easy to quantify, but national and international data do not paint an optimistic picture. According to a UNICEF report from 2020, only 33 percent of children in third grade had the expected reading level for their respective grade while just 18 percent had the expected level of numeracy skills. The same report revealed that 65 percent of children had finished lower secondary education, while only 29 percent completed higher secondary education.

The urban-rural divide was reflected in education as well. Around 80 percent of children who did not conclude each level of education lived in rural areas. Bangladesh also ranked 112th out of 138 countries in the Global Knowledge Index 2020, the lowest in South Asia. With 15 years of lofty aspirations influencing unsuccessful experiments, it's safe to say that the previous regime's education policies has failed to make a lasting impact.

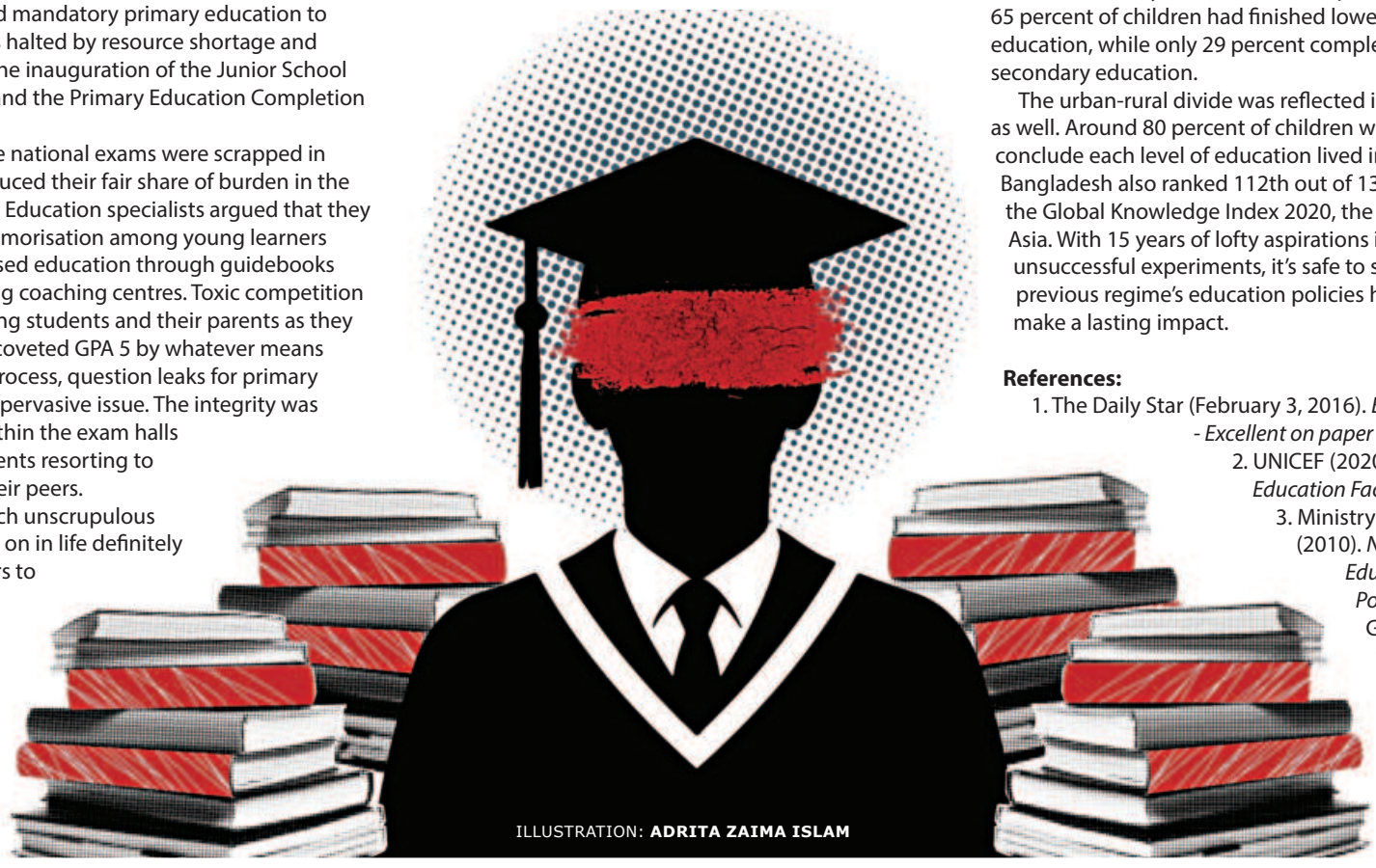

ILLUSTRATION: **ADRITA ZAIMA ISLAM**

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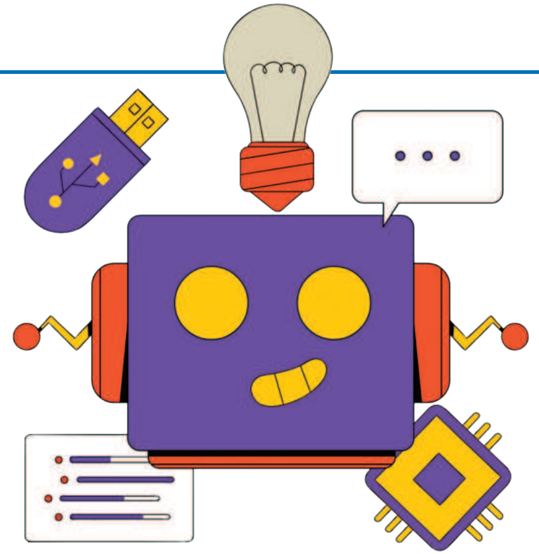
OFF CAMPUS

NAVIGATING THE AI REVOLUTION

Opportunities and challenges in Bangladesh

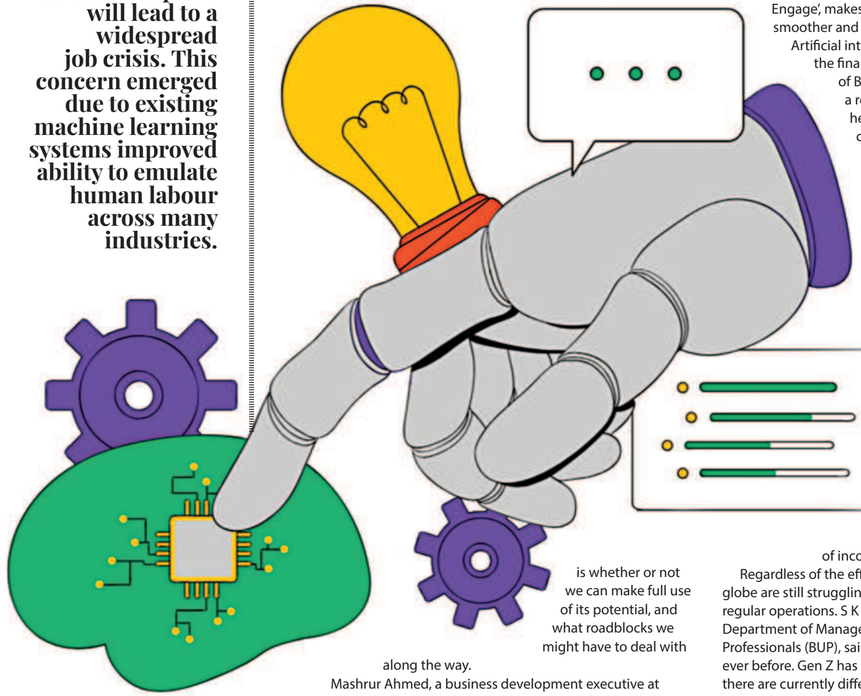


Another reason behind the resistance to AI adoption is that many people fear that the rapid integration of AI in the workplace will lead to a widespread job crisis. This concern emerged due to existing machine learning systems improved ability to emulate human labour across many industries.

TAZRIN RASHID PRITHA

The age of artificial intelligence (AI) is upon us, and it has brought huge changes in the 21st century, transforming not only industries and economies but also everyday life. Naturally, Bangladesh is also joining this AI wave, with organisations here gradually using AI to improve services and boost economic growth.

However, as businesses and organisations across the country start embracing this technology, what remains to be seen is whether or not we can make full use of its potential, and what roadblocks we might have to deal with along the way.



Mashrur Ahmed, a business development executive at Unilever Bangladesh Limited, highlighted how AI is transforming the company.

"AI helps us grow faster and work more efficiently," he said, citing partnerships with Microsoft and Accenture to develop tools like 'Una', an AI co-pilot that helps with quick decision-making. The AI is capable of answering questions by fetching data from the company's database.

AI also supports employee development at Unilever through 'Degreed', a customised learning platform like Coursera that hosts an array of courses developed in-house. By utilising AI, Degreed recommends courses tailored to individual roles and career paths.

Additionally, Unilever's AI-powered social network, 'Viva Engage', makes cross-departmental communication smoother and more engaging.

Artificial intelligence is also making significant strides in the financial sector. Akhyar Noor, CEO and Founder of Buckyy Payment Solutions Limited (BPSL), a research-based fintech solution company headquartered in Bangladesh, highlighted a concerning statistic. As of March 2024, the total disbursed loans reached BDT 16,40,855 crore, with BDT 1,82,295 crore classified as defaulted – the highest in the history of Bangladesh. This equates to an alarming 11.10 percent of disbursed loans being in default.

One of the main reasons behind this significant number of defaulted loans is that debt was granted to several individuals with no means to repay. Akhyar said, "At Buckyy, we have developed a credit scoring engine – Rini AI – using machine learning techniques, trained using the historical financial data of our partner banks. Rini AI can assess the creditworthiness of borrowers more accurately and efficiently compared to manual evaluations. Based on the evaluations, Rini AI sets a credit limit for each borrower that they can comfortably repay with their streams of income."

Regardless of the efficiency AI can offer, workplaces across the globe are still struggling, to some extent, to integrate AI into their regular operations. S K Md Anik Hassan Rabby, a lecturer at the Department of Management Studies, Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP), said, "Today's workplace is more diverse than ever before. Gen Z has already entered the workforce, meaning there are currently different generations coexisting in workplaces."

Anik further explained, "Many older adults lack the necessary digital skills and confidence to use technology effectively. For instance, a survey of 17 European countries revealed that 52 percent of individuals aged 65 and older do not use the internet. The scenario in Bangladesh is even more concerning. Under such circumstances, the mass implementation of AI could create a digital divide among generations and fuel age-based discrimination in workplaces. Sadly, a digital skills gap is evident even among the youth, with 84 percent of young people in Bangladesh lacking the basic digital skills required to use AI effectively."

Anik, therefore, suggests integrating AI gradually into operations and educational curricula, rather than hastily automating everything, to ensure its effective and efficient use.

Another reason behind the resistance to AI adoption is that many people fear that the rapid integration of AI in the workplace will lead to a widespread job crisis. This concern emerged due to existing machine learning systems' improved ability to emulate human labour across many industries.

However, The World Economic Forum predicts that while Fourth Industrial Revolution technologies driven by AI will significantly alter the world and hence, our work and lifestyles, mass unemployment may not be the inevitable outcome. Regardless, AI is already contributing to a job crisis for creative professionals in Bangladesh.

ILLUSTRATION: **ABIR HOSSAIN**

For SEO writers and graphic designers, AI tools are increasingly taking over tasks like content creation and design. This change not only threatens their jobs but also reduces the demand for creative professionals in the job market.

Musharrat Abir, an SEO writer at 10 Minute School, shared, "I started my content writing journey back in 2017, right when Bangladesh saw a boom in online news portals and Facebook e-commerce sites. There was a huge demand for content writers back then, with more vacancies than generic writers, which made it easier to get started. Fast forward to 2024, and with the widespread use of AI, many small businesses now rely on tools like ChatGPT to handle their content needs."

This shift, Musharrat explained, has made it harder for newcomers in the content writing sector to establish themselves as reputable organisations tend to favour candidates with experience and diverse portfolios. New entrants are hired less frequently. This, in turn, makes it difficult for them to build the profiles that recruiters seek in the first place.

Musharrat further noted that demand for SEO writers is declining overall, as people are increasingly turning to AI tools for more customised answers instead of reading entire articles. As a result, the reach of blogs is decreasing and the popularity of content writing as a profitable side hustle is gradually fading.

Mujahidul Islam, a freelance graphic designer, shares his thoughts regarding the use of AI in creative fields, "The threat of AI tools is not new in the visual design field. During the early days of my career, it was much easier to rank gigs on Fiverr – an online marketplace for freelance services. Clients would hire graphic designers to remove backgrounds from pictures for USD 5 or USD 10. However, in 2019, an AI tool called remove.bg took the graphic design industry by storm, allowing people to remove backgrounds from their pictures with just one click. This led many entry-level graphic designers to lose their jobs."

Mujahidul also said, "I used to create YouTube intro and outro videos for clients on Fiverr and sold my templates on sites like VideoHive. Today, my intervention is rarely needed, as AI tools can easily accomplish tasks that took me years to master and refine."

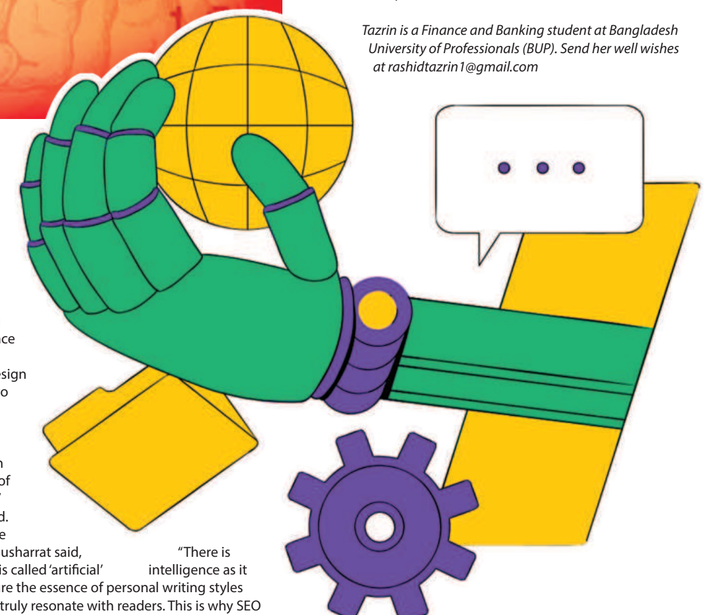
"Societies faced a similar job crisis after the Industrial Revolution," said Mashrur. "AI should not be seen as a threat, but rather as a tool that increases efficiency."

Adding to this, Mujahidul said, "We cannot deny the benefits that AI brings to the table just because it is predicted to cause a massive job crisis. Therefore, it is essential to upskill oneself to remain relevant in the job market."

Mujahidul went on to explain that rather than viewing AI as a threat, designers can focus on developing their unique style and creativity – areas where AI still falls short.

"Specialising in user experience (UX) and user interface (UI) design is another way to stay relevant, as these fields require human empathy and an understanding of user behaviour," Mujahidul noted.

Adding to the conversation, Musharrat said, "There is a reason why it is called 'artificial' intelligence as it can rarely capture the essence of personal writing styles and voices that truly resonate with readers. This is why SEO writers need to sharpen their writing skills to stay relevant in today's job market."



The use of AI has raised significant ethical concerns as more organisations in Bangladesh particularly turn to AI for their content and advertising needs. Mujahidul noted, "One such ethical issue with AI is that it often builds on existing artwork rather than creating something truly original. For example, if I enter a prompt into Midjourney AI – an AI image generator – it generates an image based on previously created art."

Mujahidul added that this process often means that real artists and graphic designers rarely receive the credit or recognition that they deserve.

"If you have travelled by metro, you may have noticed an AI-generated picture of a woman encouraging you to read a book during your journey," Mujahidul pointed out. "This advertisement, likely created by a single person using an AI tool, would previously have required models, photographers, and graphic designers to bring it to life."

Mujahidul explained that not only are these professionals facing job shortages, but the original artists whose work was used to train the data that generated the image are also deprived of royalties. "It is concerning," he concluded. "More and more organisations in Bangladesh are turning to AI for creating marketing materials, which raises several ethical concerns."

In regard to these ethical concerns, Raiyaan Ehab Shams, a growth marketer, remarked, "We are still in the novice stages of AI implementation. However, in the coming days, it will be essential for companies to develop specific policies regarding the use of AI to ensure that no one is exploited, and credit is given where it is due. For now, the least companies could do is properly disclose when they have used AI to generate images and graphics, as a step toward addressing these ethical concerns."

Relying solely on AI to generate marketing campaigns and advertisements may also not benefit organisations in the long run. Raiyaan explained, "Since AI cannot create anything truly original, if everyone relies on it, they will all end up with similar marketing strategies and materials, making it difficult for any organisation to gain a competitive edge. At the end of the day, human intervention is essential to thrive in this cutthroat competitive market."

Tazrin is a Finance and Banking student at Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP). Send her well wishes at rashidtazrin1@gmail.com

NOTICE BOARD

EWU arranges Merit Scholarship award ceremony

East West University (EWU) provided Merit Scholarship awards to 219 students from the Summer and Fall 2024 semester students for their excellent academic performance. Most of the scholarship recipients students were female. The ceremony took place on January 12, 2025, at the Manzur Elahi Auditorium of EWU in Aftabnagar, Dhaka.

The event was graced by Farooque B Chaudhury, Member of the Board of Trustees, EWU, as the Chief Guest. Professor Dr Shams Rahman, Vice-Chancellor of EWU, presided over the ceremony as the Programme Chair.

In his address, Chaudhury congratulated the scholarship recipients and emphasised the importance of academic excellence and dedication. He expressed his pride in the students' achievements and encouraged them to continue striving for excellence in their future endeavours.

Professor Dr Shams Rahman highlighted the university's commitment to fostering a supportive and enriching academic environment. He acknowledged the hard work and perseverance of the students, particularly noting the significant number of female recipients, and reiterated EWU's dedication to promoting gender equality in education.

The programme was attended by Prof. Dr Ashik Mosaddik, Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Deans, Faculty Members, Officers of EWU, scholarship recipients and their guardians, and several other dignitaries.

IUBAT hosts reunion of Mechanical Engineering Alumni Association, announces new 75-member Executive Committee

A vibrant reunion of the Mechanical Engineering Alumni Association of the International University of Business Agriculture and Technology (IUBAT) was held on January 10, 2025, at the university's campus. The day-long event brought together former students under the banner – "We are IUBATians".

The programme was inaugurated by Professor Dr Abdur Rab, Vice-Chancellor of IUBAT. Alumni reminisced, shared stories, and celebrated their achievements through songs, discussions, and a variety of engaging activities.

Key highlights of the reunion included inspiring success stories shared by alumni, an exhibition showcasing achievements over the years, and a dazzling cultural evening.

The afternoon session featured a special discussion chaired by IUBAT Pro-Vice-Chancellor Professor Dr Mahmudur Rahman. The Chief Guest for the event was Professor Dr Mohammad Zainal Abedin, Vice-Chancellor of Dhaka University of Engineering & Technology (DUET). Distinguished guests included IUBAT Treasurer Professor Selina Nargis, Dean of the Faculty of Engineering Professor Dr Md Monirul Islam, and Director of Placement & Alumni Office AKM Sharfuddin.

On behalf of the alumni, Engineer Md Tanvir Raihan, outgoing President of the association and General Manager of Delberg Cement Materials Bangladesh PSC, addressed the audience.

A key moment of the event was the announcement of the 75-member executive committee of the IUBAT Mechanical Engineering Alumni Association for 2025-2026. The committee will be led by Engineer Farhad Mahmud as President and Engineer Md Zowarder Fahad Bin Shahid (Pallab) as General Secretary. Arif Md Shahed Iqbal will serve as the Chief Advisor, supported by Dr AKM Parvez Iqbal and others as advisors.

The reunion concluded with an enchanting cultural performance. Dr AKM Parvez Iqbal, Coordinator of the Department of Mechanical Engineering, expressed gratitude to all participants and contributors for making the event a resounding success.

IUBAT was established in 1991 under the visionary leadership of Professor Dr M Alimullah Miyan. Located on a sprawling 20-*bigha* campus in Uttara, Dhaka, the university operates six faculties offering 14 academic programmes. IUBAT is home to thousands of students from across Bangladesh and over a hundred students from 12 countries in Asia and Africa.

NSU welcomes freshers in "Orientation Spring 2025" programme

North South University (NSU) hosted its Spring semester orientation programme. In the orientation programme, a total of 69 students were awarded scholarships at varying rates, including 100 percent merit scholarships granted to 21 students in recognition of their exceptional performance in the bachelor's admission test.

Brigadier General (Retd) M Sakhawat Hussain, PhD, Honourable Adviser, Ministry of Shipping, Labour and Employment, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh graced the event as the Chief Guest. The session was chaired by Professor Abdul Hannan Choudhury, Vice-Chancellor of NSU.

NSU Registrar Dr Ahmed Tazmeen delivered the welcome speech to the new students. He stated, "You are about to embark on a new journey that will shape the rest of your life. NSU is proud to be your partner on this journey."

Professor Md Rizwanul Islam, Dean of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences; Professor Shazzad Hosain,

Dean of the School of Engineering and Physical Sciences; Professor Dipak Kumar Mitra, Dean of the School of Health and Life Sciences; and Professor AKM Waresul Karim, Dean of the School of Business and Economics, introduced their respective schools.

M Sakhawat Hussain said, "As one of the top universities in Bangladesh, NSU is not just a place of higher learning but a hub of research that drives progress. We've yet to engage our universities in shaping national policies. It's time they play a role in addressing critical issues and other national challenges."

He said to the students, "Your choices will shape the nation's future. You've already sacrificed much in the July Uprising, but more will be needed to ensure our country remains stable."

Session Chair Professor Abdul Hannan Choudhury said, "Our mission is to produce graduates who not only excel academically but also care deeply about national issues and contribute meaningfully to society. Through our vibrant clubs and extracurricular activities, we offer students the chance to discover their passions, shape their goals, and grow into individuals ready to lead and make a difference."

CAREER

The trials and tribulations of TUTORING AS A STUDENT

ZABIN TAZRIN NASHITA

Tutoring has long been a lucrative way to earn money on the side for students in Bangladesh, considering that part-time jobs are not widely available or even feasible for some. Tutoring students generally involves shorter and more flexible hours compared to a part-time job and doesn't usually require any specific qualification or specialised skill, save for rehashing previous syllabi. Despite the many conveniences that it offers, taking on tuition gigs comes with its own set of problems.

Unless availed through an agency, tutoring opportunities are offered and taken on with no official procedures, which leaves room for the tutors to be financially exploited. A verbal, off-the-paper agreement means that there is no recourse for them to resort to either if they need it. So, it's usually a good idea to ensure that the other party is reliable before starting the job.

Ashfaqur Rahman, a student of Electrical and Electronic Engineering (EEE) at Islamic University of Technology (IUT), who's been tutoring since the first year of university, shares that he's had several experiences of being financially exploited. He said, "I got underpaid a lot when I tutored students. Once, an arrangement for Tk 5,000 a month was set up with a student's family, but later they cited a family emergency and paid me two thousand for the first month. This continued for the next few months as well. I didn't continue after that. There was another instance at a different gig where they didn't pay me an entire month's salary even though I took classes on a regular basis."

Another common scenario tutors often face is irregularity or delay when it comes to monthly payments. Most student tutors rely on salaries from tuition gigs for their daily expenditures. As a result, their budgets are stretched thin until they receive the next payment. There are also some tutors who agree to receive payment once a certain number of tutoring sessions have been completed, which tends to be 12 a month.

Being a female student and taking on tuition gigs can pose another set of problems. Tanjim believes that her experiences of being coerced to comply with unreasonable demands were partially attributed to her being a woman.

Mehjabeen Rahman, a student of International Relations at Dhaka University (DU), recalls her bitter experiences of tutoring. "In my five years as a tutor, every year I've had a case where I didn't get paid even after completing the agreed number of classes for the month. I always sort out my payment and the number of classes I'm going to take before I start to avoid any confusion. Even then, a lot of the parents want me to conduct more sessions than initially agreed upon, but without the extra reimbursement," she remarked.

Beyond financial exploitation, many student tutors have also had to face mistreatment when dealing with parents. Tanjim Tasnim, also a student at Dhaka University studying International Relations, shares her struggles, "I found a gig through a tuition media where I came across a guardian who was very insistent that I keep the whole salary to myself and not pay the media their share of the fee. She offered to call them and tell them that she didn't hire me, so I could keep the whole sum. Despite my efforts, she went ahead and did it anyway. I felt pressured to accept this situation."

PHOTO: **ORCHID CHAKMA**

Students who take on tuition offers sometimes observe that their time is regarded with little importance, as evident through frequent cancellations and rescheduling. Juggling one or more tuitions on top of regular academic and co-curricular activities is far from a piece of cake. It requires careful scheduling to synchronise. Cancelling classes on short notice or requesting frequent reschedules can pose significant problems for the tutors and their routines.

Tanjim recalled, "I tutored a student who studied in fourth grade. As he was just a child, I used to be in communication with his mother. There were multiple times when I went to their place and was told that the student had been sleeping and wouldn't be studying for the day. This happened even during Ramadan when I had to travel on foot in the scorching heat. I mentioned more than once that I should be notified thirty minutes ahead of time for cancellations, but it was futile. I needed the money, so I had no choice but to tolerate this behaviour."

Laheen Mashahad, a final-year student at the Islamic University of Technology, had to put up with a similar cavalier attitude. "The student's uncle contacted me about the remuneration. After I stated my expectations, he told me to visit their home to discuss it further. On the first two days that I visited their place, based on the instructions that he had given me, he wasn't home. Later, he told me to visit on a weekend but he still wasn't there when I visited. Later on, I told him that I couldn't continue taking classes unless the matter of salary was fixed. I told him my expected salary before I started, but he proceeded to offer me less than half of my request, rendering it impossible for me to continue teaching," he lamented.

Being a female student and taking on tuition gigs can pose another set of problems. Tanjim believes that her experiences of being coerced to comply with unreasonable demands were partially attributed to her being a woman. She recounted an instance where a male guardian was angered because she had rejected his offer to tutor his daughter. In addition, Mehjabeen mentioned that she often receives tuition offers that involve taking classes after dark, which she has to turn down for the sake of her own safety and comfort.

Considering the job climate of Bangladesh, tuition remains the most convenient way for a student to earn, despite all the drawbacks. If you're a student looking to undertake this venture, it's best to remain vigilant and carefully evaluate the environment you'll be working in. Finding tuition through mutual connections is the best way to go, but if you're unable to do that, it's essential to make sure the tuition media is reliable. Your expectations regarding salaries should also be settled before you start teaching. Through exercising a little caution and proper communication, you can, to the best of your abilities, ensure that your tuition journey isn't full of hurdles.

DESIGN: **ADRITA ZAIMA ISLAM**

STUDY ABROAD

Hungary: A hidden gem of higher education opportunities

PUNOMI RAHMAN TITIR

When people think of completing their higher education in Europe, they often fail to consider Hungary as a valid option. However, home to several high-ranking universities, this central European gem is steadily gaining recognition among international students for its quality education, vibrant student life, and affordable tuition.

"I wanted to complete my bachelor's degree in Europe. Hungary is a tiny country with a small population offering great education, living standards, and opportunities, so it wasn't a tough choice for me. However, it's always a good idea to research your intended major and faculty before making such a big decision," says Arhita Biswas, a rising senior at the University of Pécs.

Hungary's higher education institutions offer programmes that adhere to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) standards. This ensures that degrees from Hungarian universities are recognised across Europe and beyond. Besides, the country has a fully-funded government scholarship, known as the Stipendium Hungaricum Scholarship, open to international students pursuing bachelor's, master's, or PhD degrees.

According to Prattushi Mithila Das, an architecture student at the Budapest University of Technology and Economics, "I've always dreamed of pursuing higher studies abroad to explore and grow independently in my twenties. However, I needed to secure a 100 per cent scholarship to turn this into reality, as my parents couldn't afford for me to study abroad as a fee-paying student. After researching a multitude of options, I discovered the Indian Council for Cultural Relations and Stipendium Hungaricum scholarships, both of which I applied for and got nominated. I chose the latter, which offers a five-year course including a combined bachelor's and master's degree, with a scholarship amount of HUF 43,700 and an additional HUF 40,000 allowance. Since I live in a dormitory, I only receive the scholarship and not the allowance."

She continues, "This amount doesn't cover my additional expenses entirely. To manage my time, I work part-time because I don't like receiving financial support from home. Also, hourly pay is quite low here. Some students make up by staying in dorms and not eating out at all, barely getting by on the scholarship money alone."

The application process for the scholarship is well-elaborated on the Stipendium Hungaricum website. It is essential to apply from the scholarship website as well as the Bangladesh Ministry of Education website and get accepted from both tracks. Applicants are free to choose two universities following the same or two different majors of their interest. The selection is carried out based on your SSC/HSC or O/A Levels/ equivalent transcripts, English proficiency test scores (IELTS/TOEFL), motivation letter, and extra-curricular activities. Additionally, necessary documentation such as a passport, police clearance, and medical certificates are required.

"I would suggest having a decent IELTS score that is higher than the university requirements, a well-written resume consisting of extra-curriculars relevant to your major, high grades, strong recommendation letters, and a unique, personalised Statement of Purpose (SOP) to stay ahead of others," says Md Sakib Khan, a third-year student at the University of Pécs.

Some universities obligate applicants to sit for entrance exams followed by interviews. This is the final step of the application process and is reserved for students who have passed the primary elimination stage. Applicants can expect an email from the host institution that elaborates on the specific topics that will be included, along with sample questions. The tests are mostly arranged online and the subjects depend on the major that you have selected. For instance, if someone applies for medical school, they will likely have to sit for a Biology and Chemistry test.

"I found the tests to be rather easy. The concepts were similar to the ones I studied for my O Level exams, nothing overly difficult. As for the interview, the interviewers were very friendly and considerate, they would encourage me to go on even if I had made a mistake," shares Maisha Tahsin, currently majoring in Mechatronics Engineering at the University of Debrecen.

Another challenging aspect of pursuing a degree abroad is navigating the visa application process. However, the Hungarian student visa process stands out as a notably simple and streamlined exception. Akibul Islam, a student at the University of Pécs says, "We don't face any issues as we are already labelled as government scholars. I got an email explaining the entire process and it was fairly uncomplicated. So far, I haven't heard of visa rejections. Even if you are a self-funded student, as long as you have the finances covered and your documents are in order, you're good to go."

When moving to a different part of the world, it is important to prepare to adjust to the hustles and bustles that come with the process. As a European country, Hungary's cultural identity can be quite incompatible with South Asian traditions. While the country boasts a rich history and spirited culture, it may take some time for newcomers to acclimate. Language can be a problem initially, as Hungarian is not widely spoken outside the country and can be challenging to learn. English is mostly spoken around urban locations and tourist-heavy areas. Thus, discovering side-work opportunities or communicating with the locals often becomes a struggle.

"The issue with the language barrier is indeed troublesome as most people here prefer to speak in Hungarian over English. However, the situation has improved compared to the past. You'll get used to it over time and having Google translator on your phone is a huge help," assures Arhita

Also, Hungarian cuisine widely differs from ours and while it can be exciting for many to explore new culinary delights, others may take time to adjust their tastes to the different variants of food in Hungary. Understanding social norms is crucial too. Hungarians value punctuality, so being on time for classes and meetings is important. They also have a strong appreciation for their cultural heritage, so showing interest and respect towards their traditions and customs is always well-received. Besides, the country offers a plethora of tourist attractions for students to explore during vacations. In cities like Budapest, Szeged, and Debrecen in particular, there are extensive bus and tram networks making travel convenient.

Considering everything, Hungary stands out as a promising option for higher education in Europe. Alongside providing top-tier educational opportunities and a fulfilling experience for international students, it is a destination worth exploring.