

Global vision, LOCAL ROOTS



SANDY MACKENZIE

on Leading the Aga Khan Academy Dhaka



“Education is most meaningful when it teaches empathy — when students learn to understand before they choose to lead.”

After nearly three decades in education, Sandy Mackenzie has seen classrooms on almost every continent from teaching mathematics in his native Scotland to leading schools in China, Denmark, Senegal, and the United States. Over the years, he's learned one thing: the best schools don't just prepare students for exams. They prepare them for life.

This belief now guides Sandy Mackenzie in his role as Head of the Aga Khan Academy Dhaka, where he is shaping a generation of thoughtful, ethical, and locally grounded leaders. In an interview with The Daily Star, he reflected on his journey, philosophy, and how the International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum is redefining learning in Bangladesh.

“Bangladesh is an emerging nation with energy and progress,” Sandy said. “The Academy’s mission, values, and global network strongly resonated with me. It combines the stability of family-oriented schools, the collaboration of a wider network, and the purpose of a not-for-profit mission. That balance made joining the Academy compelling.”

His leadership philosophy centres on what he calls “learning through empathy and understanding.” Having worked across continents, he believes cultural awareness is key to meaningful education. “Working in diverse countries taught me to navigate different cultures and communication styles,” he said. “That experience helps me lead a diverse staff in Bangladesh with inclusion and equity.”



TEACHING STUDENTS TO LEAD WITH PURPOSE, NOT PRIDE

To him, education must go beyond knowledge – it must build character. “Pluralistic leadership means accepting, showing compassion for and working collaboratively with people different from ourselves; ethical leadership means producing graduates who lead responsibly rather than pursuing success at others’ expense,” Sandy explained.

He believes these values are not confined to classroom discussions but lived through daily practice. From student-led initiatives such as World Teachers Day to community projects that encourage dialogue and reflection, the Academy emphasizes service, empathy and collective responsibility. “We want students to be servant leaders – academically strong, yet committed to the common good,” Sandy added.

REDEFINING LEARNING THROUGH THE IB FRAMEWORK

The Aga Khan Academy Dhaka follows the IB

curriculum, which puts inquiry, reflection, and global awareness at the core of learning. “The IB places the learner at the centre,” said Sandy. “It develops analytical, creative, and collaborative skills that matter in a world where knowledge is everywhere.”

At the senior level, the IB Diploma Programme bridges school and university through both academic depth and personal exploration. “Students study six subjects, complete an extended essay, and take theory of knowledge,” he explained. “It builds research experience, critical thinking, and a global outlook that universities value.”

Through this approach, the Academy helps students become independent learners – confident thinkers who can question, connect, and apply their understanding to real-world challenges.

BEYOND JUST GRADES DEVELOPING THE WHOLE PERSON

For Sandy, learning doesn’t stop at the classroom door. The Academy places equal importance on students’ emotional well-being and creative growth. “Students learn best when they feel psychologically safe,” he said. “We foster an environment where mistakes are part of learning.”

Each student has an advisor, with counsellors available when needed. Lessons on emotional intelligence, digital citizenship, and mental health are built into the curriculum. “Given modern pressures like social media, we teach

students to manage stress and protect their well-being,” he added.

This approach extends beyond academics. “Extracurricular activities create lasting memories and transferable skills,” Sandy said. “Our arts and sports programmes build teamwork, confidence, and resilience.”

Through the IB’s Creativity, Activity, Service (CAS) component, students collaborate with local communities while connecting learning with empathy, service, and real-world experience.

PREPARING YOUNG LEADERS FOR A CHANGING WORLD

Sandy views technology and artificial intelligence as powerful tools if used with integrity. “We embrace technology as a learning tool,” he said. “Students create digital projects like videos and podcasts, and we have clear policies so they learn to use AI responsibly.”

Teachers, too, are lifelong learners. The Academy invests in continuous professional development, mentoring new Bangladeshi educators through its international network. “Ongoing training builds sustainable, locally led expertise,” Sandy explained.

As the conversation closed, he added, “Education must go beyond basic skills. It should spark creativity, curiosity, and honest inquiry. We want every graduate to leave here courageous, compassionate, and ready to contribute to a changing world.”

Why A-levels feel like the real boss battle

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CLASSES PICK UP PACE

The classroom environment also changes noticeably. A-Level teachers often move at a much faster speed to ensure that the syllabus is completed well before the exams. This sudden rush can catch many students off guard.

Esrat Jahan, now an A2-Level student, noticed entire chapters being “rushed through in a single class,” leaving her struggling to catch up at home. She admits that this new rhythm required better time management and more self-discipline.

The quick flow of lessons often means students must take notes attentively and review them regularly to avoid falling behind.

HIGHER EXPECTATIONS AND RESPONSIBILITY

Along with the pace, the expectations also rise. Teachers expect A-Level students to think critically and express themselves with clarity. It is no longer enough to memorise facts; they must apply, analyse, and evaluate information to show genuine understanding.

One instructor explains that O-Level exams reward short, factual answers, while A-Levels demand structured responses that demonstrate reasoning and depth. Students must use the right terminology and support their points with logical arguments or examples.

This change pushes learners to take more ownership of their education. As one tutor puts it, “The teacher gives you ammunition in class, but the real battle is fought at home.” The sense of independence can be daunting at first, but it also teaches valuable life skills such as organisation, time management, and perseverance.

Tihani shares, “At first, I used to wait for teachers to explain everything. But now I read ahead, make my own notes, and even teach my friends. It feels more grown up.” The process may be demanding, yet it slowly transforms students into more self-reliant and confident learners.

EMOTIONAL TRANSITION AND PRESSURE

The academic leap is not the only challenge. Emotionally, the shift from O-Levels to A-Levels can be overwhelming. With only three or four subjects, every mark feels more significant. The margin for error becomes small, and students feel the weight of expectations from

such as making realistic study plans, taking short breaks, and maintaining a balanced lifestyle. Talking to peers, parents, or mentors often helps relieve the emotional burden. Understanding that everyone struggles in their own way makes the process easier to navigate.

FINDING SUPPORT AND BALANCE

Despite the pressure, the A-Level journey can be deeply rewarding when approached with the right mindset. Many students believe the key lies in choosing subjects they truly enjoy. Passion often makes the workload feel lighter and the challenges less intimidating.

Khondoker advises new A-Level students, “Attend every class, ask questions, and work a little every day. It builds good habits.” Establishing a consistent routine helps keep stress under control. Some families support their children by creating quiet study spaces at home or setting up daily schedules that balance study with rest.

Students also highlight the importance of relaxation. Taking short walks, listening to music, or spending time with friends between study sessions helps clear the mind and improve focus. Small breaks often make studying more effective.

As Mir reflects on his own experience, he smiles, “I struggled at first, but now I feel like I’m really understanding things, not just memorising them.” That sense of growth, he believes, makes the hard work worth it.

For many students, this period becomes more than just academic preparation but rather a journey of self-discovery and resilience.

In the end, the leap from O-Levels to A-Levels may seem steep, but it prepares students not only for university but for life itself. It teaches discipline, adaptability, and independence which are the inevitable skills that shape confident young adults ready to face future challenges. The A-Level experience, though demanding, ultimately proves to be a journey of transformation and growth, one that students remember with pride and gratitude.

“Study groups not only help clarify difficult topics but also foster teamwork and shared motivation. Gradually, students realise that learning collaboratively makes the transition smoother and less stressful.”



parents, teachers, and themselves.

Mir and his friends often talk about the pressure of major exams, where even a single low grade can affect university goals. “Focusing on only three subjects means each one carries a lot of weight, and that can be really stressful,” admits Tihani.

It is common for students to experience moments of anxiety and self-doubt. Guidance counsellors suggest practical coping methods

 **YALE INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL**

» ENGLISH MEDIUM » CAMBRIDGE CURRICULUM



+88 01751636805
+88 01725332090

Address:
Sector-3, 14, Uttara, Dhaka.