‘Honest’ grading may have arrived, but what about the students left behind?



Imran Hossain is research associate at Brac Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD), Brac University. Views expressed in this article are the author’s own.

■ IMRAN HOSSAIN



This year’s HSC pass rates hit a 22-year low, painting a grim picture of the learning gap in schools. PHOTO: STAR

This year, more than 10 lakh candidates who appeared in two of the national public examinations in the country failed. In the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) examination, 5,04,929 candidates failed out of the 14,04,539 who took the exams under nine general education boards, with the pass rate of 64.05 percent—a 19-year low. The Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) examination saw 10,48,530 candidates in attendance under the nine general boards, of whom 5,07,281 failed, with the pass rate of 51.62 percent—a 22-year low.

These results have been drawing mixed reactions, with some appreciating the long-overdue “honest” grading while others are worried about the unsuccessful examinees. The more useful question, however, is: why were the failure rates so low for most of the past two decades? That, in my view, was because our public exam results stopped measuring learning some time ago, and that the decline of the past two years has mostly been a reflection of truthful grading. The task now is to manage the transition so that the students don’t bear the full burden of consequences.

Official data from the Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (BANBEIS) show how far the results of these public exams drifted. In 2004, less than 48 percent of HSC candidates under the general boards passed. By 2021, that figure rose to over 95 percent (excluding the 2020 “auto-pass” of examinees due to the Covid-19 pandemic). The share of students who received the top grade, GPA-5, rose even faster. In 2004, less than one percent of HSC candidates earned GPA-5. In 2021, around 16 percent did. Did learning really improve at that pace? Independent assessments of what our students can do in reading and mathematics have not shown gains on this scale.

A pass rate is a number any government can announce on results day, and students welcome good news with their families. But learning is not as immediately tangible. Over the past two decades, examiners came under pressure to mark generously and to award grace marks to students just below the pass line, and no single board or examiner could hold out while others inflated their grades. High pass rates kept parents happy and gave the government front-page photographs of students celebrating on results day. Students, parents, schools, and governments all gained from that incentive, so it is worth taking a closer look.

HSC candidates are students who have already passed the SSC exams, so in a normal system, the HSC pass rate should be similar to the SSC rate. Between 2005 and 2009, the two rates were similar indeed. Since 2010, however, the HSC pass rate has been lower than the SSC pass rate in almost every year, which is what you would expect if SSC grades were rising faster than learning.

After the political transition in August 2024, examiners were instructed to stop grading the answer transcripts generously and to award no grace marks. The SSC pass rate fell from 83.77 percent in 2024 to 68.04 percent in 2025, and then to 64.05 percent this year. The elected government that took office in February 2026 has so far maintained the stricter standard.

HSC candidates are students who have already passed the SSC exams, so in a normal system, the HSC pass rate should be similar to the SSC rate. Between 2005 and 2009, the two rates were similar indeed. Since 2010, however, the HSC pass rate has been lower than the SSC pass rate in almost every year, which is what you would expect if SSC grades were rising faster than learning.

Some may blame the pandemic. Yes, schools were shut for 18 months from mid-March in 2020, so the learning loss is real. But the cohorts that took the SSC exams in 2024 and 2025 lost the same 18 months at almost the same stage of school, and both were examined on the full syllabus. Their pass rates differ significantly. Lost learning alone cannot explain a gap that large between two groups who lost the same amount. This year’s HSC candidates largely sat for their SSC exams in 2024, under the old marking system, when 83.77 percent passed. Two years later, 51.62 percent passed the HSC—a drop of over 32 percentage points. In more than two decades, no cohort’s pass rate has fallen this far between the two exams. The July uprising disrupted schooling and probably played some part, but disruption measured in weeks cannot account for a change of this size, repeated two years running.

Bangladesh is not the only country trying to reverse grade inflation, but it has probably chosen an unusually fast pace. Ireland, whose grades rose sharply during the pandemic, promised its students that there would be no sudden adjustments. The country is lowering the grades gradually: the share of top grades, H1, fell from 12.1 percent in 2025 to 10.1 percent in 2026. The pandemic adjustment will not be fully removed until 2029. The aim here is ensuring fairness so students don’t lose university places to earlier cohorts who were graded more generously. The cost is that inflated grades stay in the system for years.

Kenya took a different route about a decade ago. In 2016, after an overhaul of its exams council to stop question paper leaks, the number of candidates scoring straight A grades in its secondary exam fell from 2,636 in 2015 to just 141. Credibility returned quickly, but so did the backlash from teachers, parents, and students. As it appears, Bangladesh is somewhat following Kenya’s pace. That approach comes with a cost that falls on particular students.

The first group is the transition cohorts. Many job circulars set minimum requirements for SSC and HSC results, and in a few years, today’s students will apply alongside earlier cohorts whose grades were inflated. A student who earned GPA-5 in 2024 and one who earned it in 2026 hold the same credential on paper, and employers will treat them alike, even though the two grades are not equivalent. The 2026 student met a harder standard and could lose a job to someone who did not.

The second is students in weaker schools. With only 3.4 percent of HSC candidates securing GPA-5 this year, top grades are likely to be concentrated in a small number of strong institutions, and the schools that relied on generous marking to look respectable no longer can.

What should be done? The first priority is not to go back. Every results day might bring pressure to soften marking again, and doing so will make the next correction only harder. Second, students caught in this transition—and in the next one—must be protected. Most universities admit both the current and the previous year’s HSC candidates, and recruiters compare applicants from five or six cohorts, hence students graded under different standards compete directly. The education boards could print each student’s percentile rank on the marksheet alongside the GPA, so that universities and recruiters can see where an applicant stood among those who sat for the same exam. Whatever grade reforms may follow in the future, that rank will mean the same thing.

Third, the retake should be held to the same standard. Here, the government has moved quickly: HSC candidates who failed one or two subjects, who make up about 70 percent of those who failed, will be able to retake those exams within a month instead of waiting a year. Those who failed three or more subjects face a harder path. The quick retake is the right decision, but it still comes with a risk. If the retake is marked more leniently than the main exam, it becomes a back door for the grace marks that were just removed. The failures also show where the gaps are: English was by far the most commonly failed subject, with more than 240,000 students failing it, followed by ICT, with close to 140,000 failed students.

We should also be clear about what a stricter grading system can and cannot do. It may push some students to study harder, but it cannot teach a student who is already far behind. Many of the students who failed this year were behind long before Class 10. The response must begin in primary school, where children either learn to read and calculate or fall behind for good.

Biman’s fleet expansion must be matched by structural reform



Air Vice-Marshal (retd) M. Mafidur Rahman is former chairman of the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (CAAB).

■ M. MAFIDUR RAHMAN

Born from the ashes of a war-ravaged nation, Biman Bangladesh Airlines began its journey on January 4, 1972 with a profound sense of national pride, zero financial capital, and a single DC-3 aircraft gifted by the Bangladesh Air Force. For a newly independent country, the national flag carrier was envisioned as the proud ambassador of our skies. Accordingly, this organisation received all support from the government. However, over the next decades, Biman’s performance and growth have remained well below people’s expectations.

Today, Biman stands at another monumental crossroads. The airline has finalised mega agreements with European manufacturer Airbus for 10 aircraft, closely following a massive deal with American aerospace giant Boeing for 25 jets. This combined procurement pipeline of 35 aircraft represents the most ambitious fleet expansion in its history.

News of these multi-billion-dollar capital commitments has sparked intense national debate. At a time when Bangladesh navigates tight macroeconomic headwinds, foreign exchange pressures, and balance-of-payment considerations, citizens and aviation economists rightfully question whether such massive expenditures are prudent. Public scepticism is deeply rooted in Biman’s operational history: recurring delays, service bottlenecks, and a historical reliance on government support to stay afloat. To satisfy the expectations of taxpayers and citizens, hardware ambition must now be matched by radical structural reform.

Biman’s modern core fleet of 19 aircraft has not overcome operational and cultural weaknesses limiting its commercial performance. Heavy dependence on government support and limited financial self-sufficiency leaves the airline exposed to economic downturns. Overstaffing hampers efficiency, and workforce productivity trails regional and global competitors. These weaknesses contribute to inconsistent on-time performance (OTP), while limited flight frequencies, schedule disruptions, and inadequate cabin service impact passenger trust, particularly among business-class travellers. Maintenance and engineering deficiencies, including occasional in-flight technical failures and prolonged aircraft-on-ground (AOG) periods during routine maintenance reduce daily aircraft utilisation despite Biman’s in-house C-check capabilities for Boeing 777 and 737 aircraft. Route decisions often favour diplomatic or sociopolitical priorities over commercial viability, often sustaining loss-making services. Limited engagement in global alliances and code-sharing partnerships further confines Biman’s reach largely to point-to-point traffic.

Here, Ethiopian Airlines offers a valuable case study: a wholly state-owned carrier that has become Africa’s leading airline and ranks among the world’s top carriers. With a record revenue of $9.1 billion in 2025-26 financial year, the airline offers a model for transforming a national carrier into a global aviation leader. Under long-serving technical leaders such as former CEO Tewolde Gebremariam (2011-2022) and current CEO Mesfin Tasew Bekele, it maintained commercial independence from political interference. Ethiopian Airlines has had eight CEOs throughout its nearly 81 years of existence. By contrast, Biman has had 44 CEOs in 54 years, most of whom had non-aviation backgrounds. Biman must adopt a merit-based culture in which career advancement depends on aviation-specific commercial performance indicators, not bureaucratic or managerial tenure.

Acquiring aircraft from both Boeing and Airbus increases operational complexity but offers geopolitical and commercial advantages. A mixed fleet appears more costly to operate because it requires separate spare-parts inventories, tools, pilot training programmes, simulators, and specialised engineering teams. On the other hand, dependence on one manufacturer exposes an airline to geopolitical tensions, trade disputes, and supplier-specific production or supply chain disruptions. Maintaining relationships with both manufacturers gives Biman greater leverage in negotiating prices, delivery slots, and long-term technical cooperation agreements. Although initial operating costs are higher, this strategy may be cost-effective in the long run.

South Asian peers offer sobering warnings of state carriers that collapsed under debt-financed fleet growth devoid of structural reforms. Air India’s pre-privatisation era saw massive debt-financed widebody orders combined with political interference, forced unprofitable routes, and inflated staffing, creating over $10 billion in losses and forcing a bailout and privatisation. Similarly, Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) and Sri Lankan Airlines were crippled by governance failures, political patronage, and an inability to forge alliances, leaving them incapable of servicing aircraft loans.

Biman’s sudden unprecedented fleet expansion has sparked concerns about its preparedness and prospects for success. Learning from the Ethiopian blueprint can help it restore public confidence and make its new fleet a source of profit rather than a financial burden. Hence, the national carrier must take the following steps without delay:

Establish commercial autonomy: Biman’s governance must transition to an independent Board of Directors comprising aviation, finance, and logistics experts. Executive leadership should be recruited based on proven aviation track records with guaranteed extended tenures.

Synchronise workforce and infrastructure growth: Pilots, technicians, and ground crew training pipelines must be scaled ahead of aircraft deliveries to avoid costly asset underutilisation.

Generate revenue from MRO and ground-handling: Drawing on Ethiopian Airlines’ model, Biman must upgrade engineering capabilities at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport (HSIA) to offer profitable third-party maintenance and ground-handling services to foreign airlines. It could also consider outsourcing selected maintenance and handling services to private operators to improve cost efficiency.

Aggressively pursue global alliances: Biman must forge code-share agreements and interline partnerships with major international carriers to sell seamless global itineraries without needing to fly proprietary metal to every corner of the world.

Optimise routes and yields: Biman must apply data-driven revenue management software for dynamic pricing. Every route should be reviewed quarterly, and prestige-driven, loss-making routes and services should be promptly suspended or made profitable.

Elevate OTP and service: Biman must set strict internal targets for on-time performance (OTP) of more than 85 percent, and modernise digital touchpoints and in-flight services to successfully compete with foreign carriers.

Acquiring modern aircraft signals ambition, but fleet expansion alone cannot transform an airline. It must be accompanied by organisational reform, stronger operational and maintenance capabilities, and a cultural shift. Many state-owned airlines have struggled to survive, becoming national burdens before being rescued through privatisation. But Biman’s extensive government privileges give it an opportunity to regain public trust. By adopting Ethiopian Airlines’ technocratic governance model and learning from regional peers’ structural failures, Biman can move from a fiscal burden to a proud, profitable driver of Bangladesh’s economic growth.

Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh
Ministry of Finance, Finance Division
Administration Branch-6
Bangladesh Secretariat, Dhaka
www.mof.gov.bd

Memo No: 07.00.0000.000.086.07.0005.26.5274 Date: 04 November, 2026

e-Tender Notice (Open Tendering Method-OTM)

This is to notify all concerned that following e-Tender is invited in the National e-GP System Portal (http://www.eprocure.gov.bd) for the procurement of goods as follows:

Sl	Tender ID	Description of Procurement Package	Tender Publication Date & Time	Last Selling of Tender document (Date & Time)	Tender Closing (Date & Time)
1	ID: 1360387	Procurement of Computer-All in one	05/11/2026 15:00	18/11/2026 16:00	19/11/2026 15:00
2	ID: 1365082	Procurement of Printer and other Accessories	05/11/2026 15:00	18/11/2026 16:00	19/11/2026 15:00
3	ID: 1337619	Procurement of Stationery and Consumables Items (Framework Agreement)	05/11/2026 15:30	18/11/2026 16:00	19/11/2026 15:05
4	ID: 1362072	Procurement of Laptop	05/11/2026 14:50	22/11/2026 16:00	23/11/2026 14:30

This is an online Tender, where only e-Tender will be accepted in the National e-GP Portal and no offline/hard copies will be accepted. Please visit the National e-GP Portal (http://www.eprocure.gov.bd) to submit e-Tender.

04.11.2026
(Md. Mahbubul Alom)
Senior Assistant Secretary
Phone: 55100119
Email: fdadmin6a@finance.gov.bd

GD-2672