The Daily Star
FOUNDER EDITOR: **LATE S. M. ALI**

Strengthen labour migration oversight

Protect our migrant workers from fraudulent recruitment and trafficking

The government's decision to make ministry approval mandatory for issuing immigration clearance to workers travelling to 12 countries, including Cambodia and Russia, is a necessary response to the growing concerns of recruitment fraud and human trafficking. However, according to a report in this daily, before this decision came, 44,122 Bangladeshis had already received immigration clearance for these 12 countries between January 2025 and October 30 this year. Of them, 27,647 received clearance for Cambodia, Russia, Laos and Belarus, all classified as Tier 3 countries in the US Department of State's 2026 Trafficking in Persons Report. This indicates that these countries don't fully meet minimum anti-trafficking standards and are not making significant efforts to do so. Our authorities should have scrutinised the recruitment arrangements much more closely.

In recent times, our workers promised legitimate jobs in Cambodia have been handed over to cyber scam networks and confined and forced to participate in online fraud, their passports confiscated. Some have also faced torture and demands for money for their release. In Russia, workers promised civilian jobs have allegedly been deceived or coerced into military service and sent to fight in the Ukraine war. The return of the bodies of three Bangladeshis from Cambodia in October, including a 23-year-old who travelled there with a BMET clearance, is a stark reminder of the authorities' failure.

As this daily reported before, traffickers lured aspiring migrants to Libya with promises of well-paid jobs in Greece, only to subject them to torture, extortion and dangerous sea crossings. In one case, a young man from Chandpur paid Tk 15 lakh to traffickers, and his family was forced to pay another Tk 11 lakh in ransom before he could be rescued. Such cases expose how trafficking networks operate across borders, often with local intermediaries and international collaborators. A recent BRAC study found that 98 percent of cyber scam victims did not receive the jobs they had been promised, while 90 percent were forced or deceived into online scams. Concerningly, 66 percent were recruited through middlemen. These findings show how easily recruiters exploit aspiring migrants through fraudulent job offers.

The latest directive should be treated as a temporary safeguard while the government establishes a reliable monitoring and verification system.

The latest directive, therefore, should be treated as a temporary safeguard while the government establishes a reliable monitoring and verification system. Before granting clearance, BMET must independently verify employers, job offers, contracts, visa categories and recruitment arrangements, rather than relying solely on information provided by the recruiting agencies. Our diplomatic missions in destination and transit countries should also be involved in checking the legitimacy of employers and ensuring that workers are not exposed to forced labour or other forms of exploitation.

At the same time, the authorities must hold recruiting agencies and intermediaries accountable for deception and trafficking. This requires investigating complaints, tracing financial transactions, and prosecuting those involved. Workers and their families must also have access to clear information about legitimate recruitment channels, employment contracts, and the risks of travelling on inappropriate visas.

Ensure accountability in all recruitment

Probe into police constable recruitment must prompt wider scrutiny of political influence

A police investigation into the irregularities in constable recruitment during the Awami League regime has exposed the extent to which political influence and corruption can undermine public institutions. The probe found that at least 1,173 serving constables had used fake permanent addresses to secure jobs under district-based quotas between 2014 and 2024, 980 of them recruited in Dhaka alone. It also found other irregularities, including political interference, preferential treatment, and test score manipulation. This warrants a thorough investigation and appropriate action against those responsible.

While we welcome efforts to uncover past wrongdoings and establish accountability for corruption and abuse of power under previous administrations, such efforts must not become a selective exercise that focuses only on the irregularities under the Awami League or the interim regime. The culture of political patronage and undue influence over public institutions has not necessarily changed with the exchange of power. Indeed, allegations of politically motivated appointments, promotions and placements at different levels have continued under the current government. There have also been claims of political screening of candidates taking government job recruitment tests, as well as decisions being made or withheld on political considerations. These concerns deserve rigorous scrutiny as well, because changing the people in power means little if the practices that undermine public institutions remain unchanged.

The constable recruitment investigation has also raised questions about the responsibility of the officials who facilitated or overlooked these irregularities. The Police Headquarters is now verifying the findings before submitting the report to the home ministry. However, accountability must extend beyond the recruits who allegedly used fake addresses. District police chiefs and others involved in verifying, recommending and approving appointments must also be investigated where there is evidence of wrongdoing. The Narayanganj case, where 18 constables were dismissed over recruitment irregularities but the then superintendent of police was later promoted, underscores the need for accountability for those in positions of authority.

Above all, the government must address the systemic weaknesses that allowed such practices to thrive. The district-based recruitment system, in which SPs make the final recommendations for constable appointments, must have effective safeguards against political interference, bribery and favouritism. Transparency in the selection process, independent oversight, and clear accountability for officials are essential to restore public confidence in police recruitment. The government must demonstrate its commitment to good governance by addressing corruption, political patronage and undue influence within its own administration.

The real deficit in higher education

BLOWIN' IN THE WIND



Dr Shamsad Mortuza is vice-chancellor at the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB).

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

The government made a bold and necessary move to avoid the populist temptation of cosmetically improving results for political gain, taking a step towards establishing academic integrity by undertaking an impartial grading process at public examinations. The process has resulted in a low pass percentage in this year's higher secondary and equivalent exams. A low pass rate, however, does not automatically guarantee educational excellence. Nearly half of the candidates failed the exams, many of them due to their poor performance in English and ICT. This failure is a sorry sign for a country that keeps drumming the need for joining the 4IR bandwagon and watching the future through the demographic dividend window.

For the successful 6,46,685 HSC and equivalent candidates, there is a sudden availability of extra seats at the tertiary level. According to the University Grants Commission (UGC), there are nearly 15 lakh undergraduate places for the 2026-27 academic session. This is not a final vacancy count as earlier cohorts and supplementary candidates will also seek admission. Nevertheless, the smaller pool of successful students has sharpened the prospect of a much larger number of unfilled places.

The familiar anxiety after every HSC exam about finding placement in higher education has been replaced by the news of extraordinary abundance in our universities. The apparent luxury of empty seats carries the sighs of failed students as well as the signs of unplanned expansion at the tertiary level. Universities, colleges and programmes have multiplied without sufficient coordination between academic resources, student aspirations, and the opportunities awaiting graduates. We have become accustomed to institutions opening randomly, paying less attention to whether those places constitute an education that students have reason to choose.

The reality is, not all seats are equally desirable. A place in an unwanted discipline cannot compensate for an inaccessible place in a preferred programme with credible employment prospects. These opportunities differ in price, location, resources and eligibility. Their addition produces numerical abundance while leaving particular shortages unresolved. For instance, the reported national total includes affiliated colleges and private universities. Quite possibly, the successful candidates would like to vie for the 63,656 places at public universities.

Then again, the reputation of a public university does not automatically make all its programmes attractive. For instance, Chittagong University's official fifth-call notice of May 3, 2026 recorded 152 vacancies among 310 places across six subjects. Persian Language and Literature and general Sanskrit admitted no one against 40 and 5 available seats; Bangladesh Studies filled 28 out of 70. Most public universities allow internal migration to accommodate the incoming students' choices. Dhaka University announced that special migration filled 340 places in August 2025. These seats are often left empty due to delayed offers, qualifying thresholds, missed deadlines, and movement between institutions.

Over the years, many of these traditional public universities have relied heavily on the government support and the guaranteed student flow due to their affordability and accessibility. The market-driven programmes and performance-oriented policies at private universities have posed existential threats to their public counterparts. Many of the better students, who receive generous scholarships and tuition waivers, are now opting for top-tier private universities as their main study destination.

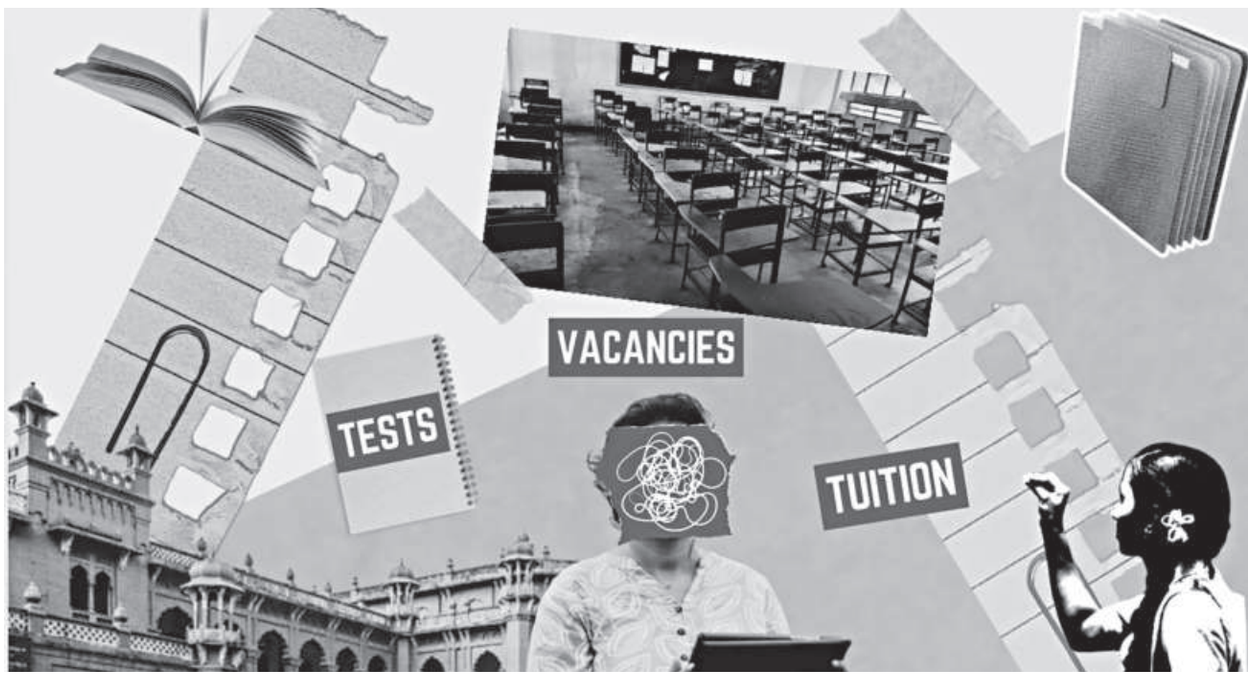
However, practical considerations must be weighed in before deciding on a university. A student may obtain an affordable public university place in an unwanted subject while a preferred programme at a credible private institution remains beyond reach. Tuition is only part of the calculation; cumbersome admission procedures, cluster tests, overlapping admission test schedules, accommodation, transport, equipment, and the possibility of losing income also matter.

As a university administrator, I recognise the pressure that falling enrolment places on institutions. For private universities that rely on student tuition fees and budgets, fewer students means compromised academic services in terms of faculty, scholarships and research. But students cannot be asked to rescue institutions by accepting unsuitable programmes. Nor should financial anxiety lead us to admit students without adequate support or reduce the academic resources that make a degree worth pursuing.

Still, many students are forced to choose newer or regional universities that have not shaped into fuller institutions. They have the potential to transform their local communities and contribute to the regional economy. But for these institutions to thrive, we need a concerted policy of decentralisation and to ensure that students find confidence in their teachers, laboratories, accommodation, safety and transport. For better teachers to relocate themselves to newer campuses, the regional towns need to provide the basic living standards. If teachers cannot send their children to a proper school or get standard medical services, they are unlikely to dedicate their time to a peripheral campus. Unfortunately, our unplanned growth of universities focused mostly on bricks and mortar, not the ecosystem.

Weak demand for particular disciplines also requires a considered response. Languages, literature, philosophy, history and basic sciences that have grown out of fashion must reinvent themselves by embracing rigorous scholarship and incorporating communication, research, digital competence and other capabilities students can use. At the same time, expanding fashionable degrees without adequate resources or realistic career guidance can reproduce disappointment under more marketable names.

There are students who will look beyond Bangladesh altogether. How many of this year's HSC cohort will explore overseas study is not yet established. A British Council official recently estimated that 55,000-60,000 Bangladeshi students go abroad for higher education annually. That figure covers higher education generally, not necessarily from this year's HSC cohort. The trend indicates that students who find a suitable foreign programme may leave while a domestic place remains empty. Others will investigate scholarships and partnerships but stay because funding does not materialise. We need to understand these decisions rather than assume that every departure is a rejection of Bangladesh or every unfilled seat represents surplus educational capacity. As a strategic intervention, our universities need to invest in internationalisation. Credible joint programmes and exchanges can widen access to international education at home.



VISUAL: **ALIZA RAHMAN**

The objective should be informed mobility and better domestic provision, giving students sound reasons to choose among them.

The HSC and equivalent exam results have shown the government's sincerity in dealing with uncomfortable outcomes. Higher education now demands the same level of transparency. We need transparent programme costs, audited operational capacity, coordinated admissions and evidence of learning, retention, and graduate outcomes. Public investment and private expenditure should both pursue dependable education. The task is to turn the honesty demanded of examination scripts into honesty about our universities. Empty seats should concern their administrators; the absence of affordable, suitable and credible choices should concern us all.

Bangladesh needs a bipartisan US strategy



Dr M Kabir Hassan is professor of finance in the Department of Economics and Finance at Louisiana State University in New Orleans, US.

M KABIR HASSAN

For Bangladesh, the impact of the US midterm election results could well extend to its RMG industry, investments, and diplomatic relations. The now-majority party in Congress will, come January 2027, help shape the environment in which Bangladesh, among other countries, pursues its economic and strategic interests. However, expecting more favourable relations or outcomes would be unwise. Bangladesh must pursue a strategy that holds up regardless of what happens in Washington.

Elections for the House or Senate don't elect the president, but they can shape oversight, spending priorities, and the potential for new laws. The administration can continue implementing trade and international relations policy even if the opposition party takes control of one or both chambers. More intense scrutiny and negotiation could happen in that case. In either case, Bangladesh is not guaranteed to receive concessions.

The economic stakes are significant. According to the United States Census Bureau, US imports from Bangladesh totalled more than $9.47 billion, while exports to Bangladesh totalled around $2.39 billion in 2025. This trade imbalance matters in Washington because the US values foreign access to the American market, as well as opportunities for American producers. Bangladesh needs to explain the mutual benefits of trade relations with the US in terms of employment, commercial, and supply chain gains.

Dhaka's trade diplomacy strategy should therefore look beyond requests for favourable treatment. RMG manufacturers, US consumers and producers all share an interest in a stable trade environment. Bangladesh should seek partnerships with all these parties to show how sudden cost increases disrupt purchasing decisions and established supply chains.

The bilateral trade agreement announced earlier this year covers a wide range of areas. Following the midterm election, Bangladesh's first order of business should be to practically analyse those as well as its trade relations with the US. To do this, the commerce ministry should work closely with both exporters and Bangladesh's officials in Washington. It should identify which elements of the trade relationship are currently functioning properly, which remain unaddressed, and which have the potential to yield measurable gains. Export-based businesses depend on accurate information on relevant duties, product coverage, and compliance standards to plan strategically. Political reassurance cannot be a substitute for this.

The bilateral trade agreement announced earlier this year covers a wide range of areas. Following the midterm election, Bangladesh's first order of business should be to practically analyse those as well as its trade relations with the US. To do this, the commerce ministry should work closely with both exporters and Bangladesh's officials in Washington.

Labour reforms should be central to Bangladesh's efforts in this regard. Ensuring workers' rights to associate freely, providing safer workplaces, and enforcing labour law effectively serve the country's development interests. Labour reforms also support its case with lawmakers, consumers, and investors in the US.

Investment should receive equal focus. While diplomacy may bring new opportunities, investors ultimately assess how contracts are enforced, whether regulations are consistent, whether sufficient energy is available, and whether a normal business environment exists where they can operate without unexpected challenges. Bangladesh should select a few commercially viable opportunities in the energy, logistics and technology sectors and develop them with transparency in all procurement practices and credibility in all forms of dispute resolution.

Commercial diplomacy also needs to maintain financial discipline. All purchases from the US should meet legitimate requirements and withstand scrutiny based on cost, financing options, and procurement. Any expensive commitment made solely to demonstrate political goodwill could create long-term fiscal or foreign exchange burdens. Strengthening relations should increase mutually beneficial trade while protecting domestic economic interests.

From a diplomatic standpoint, Dhaka needs to maintain continued involvement at every level of the US government. While maintaining good relationships with the White House and Department of State remains important, involvement with relevant congressional committees, congressional staff, and business constituents is also valuable. To maintain relationships with both sides, Bangladesh must consistently present factual information about itself. Assuming that direct access to certain individuals or partisan affinity will build significant diplomatic influence over time will make the country vulnerable to losing influence when the political climate changes.

The Rohingya crisis must continue to be a major diplomatic concern. The UN published a revised response plan seeking $710.5 million to support refugee populations and host communities in 2026. Bangladesh should make a continued case for humanitarian aid while continuing to advocate for greater international accountability regarding conditions allowing for a safe, voluntary and sustainable return for Rohingya refugees. Congressional engagement should link humanitarian relief efforts with regional stability and transparent aid deployment.

For the next six months, Bangladesh should focus on three priorities: a coordinated bipartisan engagement strategy in Washington; a publicly stated programme of trade and investment reforms with defined objectives; and a concerted diplomatic campaign to promote ongoing support for Rohingya refugees. All three priorities require designated institutional responsibilities with routine review. The diaspora community can offer expertise and connections, but professional diplomacy must provide direction.

Regardless of the results in the US midterm election, Bangladesh will still need to carry out domestic reforms, negotiate carefully, and maintain institutional credibility. It should prepare to address the next Congress with evidence-based proposals and a cohesive explanation of mutual interests that the two countries can pursue together.

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Newsroom: Fax- 58156306 reporting@thedailystar.net
Advertisement: 01711623910 advertisement@thedailystar.net GPO Box: 3257
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