

Grading Educational Performance

The latest gazette notification of the Education Ministry on the modified grading system for public examinations at the SSC and HSC levels, appears to be quite reasonable. The seven step letter-grading—the highest A+ corresponding to 80 to 100 'star' marks, and the lowest F equivalent to 00-32, which stands for failure—is more or less an internationally received system and it should not be much of a problem for teachers and taught here to overcome initial disorientation, if any, provided the same is followed for class work as well. Private schools and universities here are pretty comfortable with a similar system.

But grading the performance of examinees alone has not been the major snag although it does have an impact on the ultimate crop of high school and college graduates. Numerous surveys and reports on Bangladesh's education sector over the past decades have pointed to the declining standard at every level, but serious measures to arrest the trend, and enhance the quality and quantity of schools and colleges, have not been put in place yet. However, the above grading system appears to have an early 'weeding' provision. An SSC examinee with an F (below pass) in any subject would not be eligible for HSC. But would it be fair to implement this otherwise pragmatic point without first guaranteeing that the quality of teachers and teaching are simultaneously enhanced?

In the absence of adequate 'quality' schools and colleges, a proliferation of private 'learning-shops', so to say, are filling the gap, many of which are geared to making money not imparting proper education to the growing number of children and youth in Bangladesh. There must be an enlightened policy to ensure that these enterprises do deliver the standard quality, both in curricula and conduct. If we mean to transform our population into an educated and skilled labour force fit to survive in a 21st century information and knowledge-based world, we must do more. Nothing less than overhauling the entire system, at primary, secondary and tertiary levels is called for. It is a task that no government alone can handle, given the entrenched culture of material and mental corruption throughout the body politic in general and the education sector, in particular.

A survey on post-primary education a couple of years ago found that many of the thousands of institutions that mushroomed over the past decade registered 'ghost' students and teachers with the sole purpose of robbing the government exchequer of the earmarked subsidy. Cosy links between a section of education sector employees and the founders of the questionable institutions sustain such fraud, including the leaking of question papers, issuing false certificates and mark sheets and anything else, for money. A cleaning up drive was noticeable in this regard, together with an anti-cheating campaign. But to really institute a lasting culture of accountability, and recover the lost morality in our education sector, would take more than a generation of cleaning up, to say the least.

Nothing short of a national revolution is needed to undo the harm that decades of apathy has wrought. We might look to the success stories in the region, such as East and South East Asia. Singapore for example has an education policy geared to 'Learning to think and thinking to learn'. Dare we suggest—start with the top first and let the trickle-down effect reach our children and youth? No nation can really 'take off' without the fundamentals in place first—that is, basic, up to date, quality and free education for all, preferably up to secondary level. As for tertiary education, the sooner we have a rational policy the better will be our chances of making it meaningful. Courses must be designed with the 21st century world in mind, and teachers trained likewise to ensure quality guidance. Financial support for aspiring scholars must also be instituted but only on the basis of academic performance and financial need, not political connections.

What we have to ensure is that whatever the kind of institution offering education in the country—secular or religious, English medium or vernacular, private or public, rural or urban—a minimum national standard of education, comparable to the countries that have gone ahead in the region, must be enforced throughout. This 'minimum' public and private education should be good enough to equip our human resource with the right skills to be productive.