

SINGLE TEST FOR SIMILAR PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

Universities against it

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The much-hyped "cluster system" in enrolment at public universities could not be introduced in last four years despite a decision taken by the government to that end to ease admission seekers' hassle.

The University Grants Commission, the statutory apex body for higher education, has long been advocating for such a system but could not be successful due to opposition mainly from some public universities.

The candidates, after results of the ongoing HSC examinations are published, will be caught in the admission battle again if the system is not intro-

duced now.

It is suggested that universities of similar characteristics be brought under an individual cluster with a single admission test for each of them. For example, science and technology universities might be brought under a cluster and agriculture universities under another. In that case, candidates would sit for admission tests maximum twice for a place in any of the universities belonging to those two clusters.

The education ministry in 2010 decided in principle to introduce the system to reduce the admission hassle and help candidates get out of the grip of coaching centres. The initiative

could not be implemented and has apparently been taken off the ministry's agenda.

All 34 universities have meanwhile kept arranging individual admission tests. The UGC in its several annual reports suggested modifying the admission process terming it too expensive, questionable and coaching-oriented.

Officials in the Ministry of Education and UGC said a number of public universities were not in favour of the cluster system since the existing one was directly linked to financial benefit for the teachers.

"Many teachers are involved in the

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admission process -- from selling forms to holding the examinations and checking scripts. They get a good amount of money from it. So, they don't want to bring any changes to the existing system," said a top official of the ministry asking not to be identified.

"The authorities of the universities, on the other hand, deposit a portion of the money that comes from the admission and distribute the rest among the teachers involved in the process. Nobody knows what amount the universities earn, and what they deposit," the official added.

Moreover, teachers of some reputed universities were against being tagged with other universities apparently for their ego problems, the official observed.

As a result, the existing system persists, putting huge pressure on the admission seekers and their parents or guardians. It also eats up at least five months from the education life of the students to get enrolled in the universities after passing the HSC exams.

As soon as the HSC exams are over, most of the admission seekers turn to coaching centres and spend a large amount of money, which most parents from mid- or lower-income groups would like to keep in their pockets.

Apart from spending the coaching fee ranging from Tk 7,000 to 10,000, many of them have to stay in cities like Dhaka or Chittagong for three to four months. In addition to that, they need to buy admission forms that cost Tk 400 to Tk 500 each. Most average students cannot afford to take forms from only one or two universities as the move might jeopardise their academic career in case of failure to obtain a place because of a tough competition.

Besides, the candidates have to

decision in the face of strong opposition from a group of students, who agitated under the banner "Conscious Sylhetis", terming the combined test "discriminatory".

Contacted, UGC Chairman Prof Dr AK Azad Chowdhury said the cluster system would be well coordinated and ease the hassle of admission seekers.

"Every year when we discuss the issue with the vice-chancellors, they initially agree, but when it comes to practical application they show reluctance," he told The Daily Star.

One of the reasons, he said, was that the teachers and employees involved in the admission process got some honorarium from the admission. Besides, the universities are autonomous and they thought introducing the cluster system would cost that characteristic, he added.

"We will soon sit with the vice-chancellors to discuss the issue. We will recommend a system for the admission test, but it is totally up to the universities concerned to decide on which system they would follow," mentioned Azad.

Prof Ruhul Amin, president of Association of Universities of Bangladesh, a platform of the vice-chancellors of public universities, said they would take a decision after the announcement of results of this year's HSC exams.

Also VC of Hajee Mohammad Danesh Science and Technology University, Prof Amin said there were both merits and demerits of the cluster system.

"Even many guardians don't appreciate the system. We have seen the movement of guardians against the combined admission test in Sylhet," he noted.

travel, often with their parents or guardians, from across the country and sometimes they have to check in at hotels to sit for the admission tests. In most cases they have to vie for a seat at separate faculties, sometimes even separate departments, under the same university through separate tests.

Contacted, Education Minister Nurul Islam Nahid said the students along with their guardians had to face troubles for enrolment at the universities.

"Coaching business has mushroomed over the years centring the admission tests as economists estimate the total size of the business at Tk 32,000 crore," he added.

The minister further said a one-hour admission test could not fully judge the merit of a student, who spent at least 48 hours in the exam hall at the HSC level.

Nahid, however, said the vice-chancellors of the universities at a meeting last year agreed to go for the cluster system from this year. "We hope they would implement it this year," he added.

Last year, Shahjalal Science and Technology University and Jessore Science and Technology University went for a combined admission test approved by the UGC.

However, SUST backtracked on its