

# Leave the undergrad admission tests to academics

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NEWSPAPER reports state that the Ministry of Education has issued a directive to all universities to admit students at undergraduate level on the basis of results in secondary and higher secondary examinations. The ministry says that concern for saving time and money of the guardians has propelled this directive. As well-intentioned as it may be, the directive in the current state of affairs is fundamentally flawed. While it would save time and money, it would mean expediency at the cost of quality of the admission process.

The political desire (it has much to do with politics only) for taking numbers as a surrogate for quality in education has made the examiners extremely lenient in marking, and the country is fortunate (!) to witness such an explosion of 'talent' that probably we are on track of being in the record books for producing the highest proportion of young talents on earth. But the problem is, as teachers in the tertiary level, we often find that the 'talents' do not possess the attributes of the highest achievers and shockingly are not always groomed for higher education. The exponential growth of the number of full grade point average (GPA) achievers in secondary and higher secondary examinations over the last couple of years is simply unrealistic. Dispensing with the stardom-centric so-called merit position and division based result and introducing GPA system was a very good move but over-emphasis on projection of progress through positive results without any real concern for quality is pushing it to the brink.

This directive of the ministry, if followed, would make the already stretched and corruption-prone public examinations even more so. Though integrity in medical college admission tests has been an issue and occasionally even admission tests in public universities have not remained unscathed from the same question marks, the corruption in public examinations has been much bigger an issue than in admission tests. As there is an influx of 'talents,' it is not clear that when students with identical grade points apply for admission, which factors would determine who gets admission. It can be assumed that age and other merit-neutral subjective factors would kick in. Our

bureaucracy will devise innovative mechanisms for dealing with it but the problem is that we cannot be so upbeat in believing that such mechanisms would be able to protect the quality and integrity of the admission tests.

Moreover, if the directive is implemented the whole dynamics of the admission process would change, since the admission process would then ultimately depend on the results of public examinations administered by education boards which are controlled directly by the Ministry of Education. The university administration, which is almost entirely beyond the control of bureaucrats, would lose their control on the admission process. The result will not just be loss of academic freedom or discretion but, given the way Bangladesh works, students from under-privileged sections of the community may lose out.

Although the directive, at least in the current scenario, is in the opinion of this author grossly flawed, there is much to be done for saving the time and money of the guardians. Radical reforms of the existing admission process are possible and may be desirable but they have to be undertaken by academic administrators who understand academia. Eminent writer Muhammed Zafar Iqbal has for quite some time advocated radical overhaul of the system. He has quite cogently presented that multiple admission tests in public universities (which can often be for individual subjects within the same faculty) is a source of revenue for public universities. His calls for a unified admission test for multiple universities have fallen on deaf ears. For a start, the university administrators may endeavour to take as few admission tests as is possible within a university.

In this regard, the unit based system followed in Dhaka University, Jagannath University, Shahjalal University of Science of and Technology, etc., is commendable.

If the ministry wants to save the time and money of the guardians, it must first ensure that the secondary and higher secondary examinations can distinguish the best students from the rest. In the meantime, the bureaucrats in the ministry would do well if they invest their resources in improving the quality of education in secondary and higher secondary levels and leave tertiary education to the academic administrators who can do it much better than the bureaucrats. For centuries, academic matters have been left to the academics for good reasons; let our bureaucracy not intrude on this sphere.

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