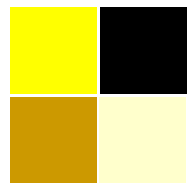


Absence of Synchronization in Bangladesh's Education System

By Khaled Bin Kamal

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www.ideasfd.org

Email: ideasfd@gmail.com

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Webster Dictionary defines the term **Synchronization** as *an adjustment that causes something to occur or recur in unison*. This term is widely used to denote the successful performance of an orchestra where a large number of artists play music instruments, usually in a predetermined fashion. When all the artists are able to perform as guided that results a wonderful tune and eventually attracts applause from the audience is said to be a perfectly *synchronized* performance.

I am, however, using this term in this article in order to give the readership an idea about how perfect coordination, advanced thinking and consistent policies are needed in order to provide people a life that is ever desired by all. If the related activities are not coordinated, if they are not linked with each other, or in a nutshell are not *synchronized*, it can cause trouble to the general citizens as it is evident in the daily activities in our country.

Bangladesh is one of those countries which is still struggling with lots of chronic problems although we have already passed 40 years after becoming Independent. If we conduct an analysis of the root causes of such problems, then some of the causes will be readily apparent. One of such causes is persistent lack of readiness and lack of coordination in systems under which we are conducting our daily activities.

Just take the example of the education sector in the country. It is one such area where we will find lots of activities done already, however, still we are unable to ensure the optimum benefit out of it. Hardly anyone would disagree that to provide education to the people, it is important to have an organized and balanced system where the purpose of taking education can be effectively fulfilled and managed.

In the following paragraphs, I will share my observations about our current education system that consists of multiple forms and I am particularly highlighting the persisting visible absence of synchronization amongst many of these forms or media.

Intense Competition for Survival

Let's start with my own story which I am sure is the same for most middle class educated people. I started my education in Bengali medium. In my time, besides Bengali medium of education, there was also a parallel Madrasah based education system. The English medium then existed, however, in a very limited scale. Only highly affluent class of people in the city could afford English medium education for their children. *Karigori* or Technical medium was another system where students used to be taught with various technical skills to make them competent for easy and quick employment.

Amongst the Bengali medium schools, there was huge competition to get admission into few Government owned schools and well reputed private schools especially in the cities, more specifically in the capital city Dhaka. A child who was not even aware of his or her surroundings, used to be thrown into an unhealthy competition in order to survive in such a competitive world.

A child was taught the message *'If you want to survive in this world, you will have to face the competition and fight'*. When we grew up, our stress for winning the competition increased at even a higher rate. We had to score well persistently so that we could get admission in a good college after the SSC, and to a good University after passing HSC.

After going through all these tests throughout the last two and a half decades, a simple question often comes to my mind is that *"Are we residing in a civilized society or are we still living in a pre-historic era where we need to fight with each other in order to ensure our survival in the society? Doesn't it indicate our failure to balance between the demand and the supply of quality educational institutions?"*

I admit that there is a need for competition, but I believe there has to be a cap of maximum limit of such stressful tests throughout the whole student life in order to ensure the normal flow of development.

Lack of Communication about the Change

Let me now highlight one of the major changes in the education system that took place in the last fifteen years. In order to align with the global standard of education and to reduce discrimination amongst the students, our decision makers converted the age-old scoring system to a grade based evaluation system. From 2001, we saw the results of various national exams being published under the grading system or GPA.

It's an irony that parents took couple of years to understand what GPA stands for and all the myth behind. We observed a clear absence of planning as regards the communication of such conversion to the general mass.

Now, of course, after a decade is passed, this system is well known to all the students, however, it is highly unlikely that the parents, particularly in the rural areas, understand the new system properly and they know how a grade point is different from the previous evaluation system based on divisions. The situation could be much improved if a well-planned campaign had been launched before the system was introduced.

Change in the Evaluation Criteria

When the first result under the new grading system was released, only few students got GPA 5.0 (A+), which was then considered the highest possible grade. At that time, one had to obtain straight A+ in all subjects in order to achieve GPA 5.0.

This small number of A+ holders created a bit dissatisfaction amongst the students and the parents, and in order to appease the growing tension, the Education Ministry brought forward an adjustment that allowed to consider the grade of the optional subject in the calculation of the final GPA.

As a result, many students started to obtain GPA 5.0 in the subsequent years, even though they did not have A+ in all the subjects. The trend still continues. In 2011, almost 77 thousand students at the SSC level obtained GPA 5.0, while the corresponding number was around 83 thousand in 2010¹.

Our Hon'ble Education Minister might consider these numbers as a reflection of the success of the policies undertaken under his leadership; however, one might argue to what extent it is realistic to place all these students under the same merit class.

One might recall that during the traditional score based evaluation system, there was an official recognition of the most talented students through the publication of the combined merit list. Such a recognition of outstanding

¹ In our previous version of this note, the 2010 number was incorrectly mentioned as 62 thousand. We apologize for this unintentional error. The correct number has been obtained from Priyo News, an online news portal (source: <http://news.priyo.com/education/2011/05/12/ssc-results-published-8231-pas-25766.html>) – IFD Management.

talents is absent under the present grading system, which I believe is an injustice to the meritorious students of the country. It deprives them from the due recognition that they deserve and it also acts as a disincentive for the most talented students for performing the best.

Although there is no recognition of the outstanding talents under the present grading system, one surprising aspect to note here that, following the adjustments were made by the Government, the market actually reacted negatively to such a Government step, and developed its own unofficial higher grade, which is popularly known as “Golden A+”. The colleges, while admitting their students, started to treat all A+ holders differently, and scored them better than other GPA 5.0 holders.

Now the question is, *“Is it not possible for the Education Ministry to respect the demand of the market and recognize Golden A+ as the highest possible grade and correct the mistakes done previously?”*

The answer of this question is not simple and straight forward. If the Education Ministry now introduces a new higher grade, then the obvious question would arise, *“What will happen to those students who obtained A+ in all the subjects in the past and were not fortunate enough to be rated as “Golden A+” holders, which would be introduced in the future? Aren’t we discriminating those students just due to the lack of planning and advanced thinking of our policy makers?”*

Public-Private Universities vs. National University

After facing all the different hurdles in the school and the college level, when a student progresses for higher education in the Universities, s/he even faces a new and completely distinct disparity.

These disparities are between the systems in the Public and Private Universities vs. National Universities. All the Public Universities and Private Universities follow English as the medium of teaching, and most of the reading materials are in English. However, in the National Universities, English is rarely used as a medium of teaching.

A student, particularly from the rural area, who was raised with relatively poor knowledge of English, finds it difficult to cope with relatively more difficult English in the higher education of Public and Private Universities. On the other hand, students coming from good urban institutions or from English medium schools can easily excel others for their previous sound foundation of English.

The situation is even more pathetic for those students who neither get admission in the Public Universities nor have the financial ability to afford Private University education. They are the ultimate losers.

They still have the traditional way of higher education which is completely unique. They usually have reading materials in Bengali and their Degrees are titled as Honours and Master Degrees. It is a well-regarded, however, less publicized fact that after the introduction of the four-year semester based Bachelor Degrees (such as Bachelor in Business Administration or BBA), the traditional three year 'Honours' and one year 'Master' Degrees in various subjects have become obsolete.

But unfortunately, the students under the National University system graduate from their respective institutions with a sub-standard degree although they have the full rights as citizens to be compared with all their peers in the same platform.

They are, by default, the candidates falling out of the short list for the interviews in the quest for the best jobs in the market, although they might have good results. Such transition of one step to another of the education cycle makes it really difficult for a student to cope with the environment and eventually does not make him or her fit for the competition in the job market when s/he graduates. But the good news is that few colleges and universities under the National University system started comprehensive four-year Bachelor Programmes like other renowned Universities.

Public vs. Private Universities

Our education system is also suffering from another illness if we compare the admission systems between and amongst the best Public Universities and other leading Private Universities.

For example, Business graduates from IBA (University of Dhaka) and few Private Universities are now a day highly valued by most of the top rated companies in the country. Having the same degree, the graduates from Business Faculty (University of Dhaka) are usually less valued. There are two underlying reasons.

First, the admission test module of IBA is designed in a manner that requires a student to have a solid background of both English and Mathematics. Students from English medium as well as students from Bengali medium with Science background enjoy a privilege in this

admission test because most of them are already having a solid foundation in both these subjects.

However, the HSC graduates from the Commerce background are unable to compete in this test just because their educational background is not compatible to the contents of the admission test of IBA. Now the question is, *“Where the access to the best institutions is being restricted due to the faulty design of school and college level education, how can you then prove yourself eventually in the job market?”*

One might now ask, *“Is it required to get chance into IBA or any other reputed Private University for ensuring the best job in the market? A student himself or herself should become market compatible by his or her own endeavour, right?”*

Second, the students graduating from English medium schools are treated differently when they face competition in the Public Universities. An English medium student finds it very difficult to cope with the syllabus of the admission tests for Government owned Public Engineering or Medical Universities/Institutes. Their syllabus in the ‘O’ & ‘A’ levels are different from that of Bengali medium, and after completing the ‘A’ level, they don’t get sufficient time to cover the additional materials that are required to pass the admission tests.

This acts as a disincentive for an English medium student to be admitted to a Public University. As a result, almost all the English medium students either go abroad for higher education or get admitted into a Private University.

Since they come from an affluent class of the society that make them relatively more presentable in front of the interview boards, and at the same time, they have a good command in English, which is considered to be one of the main required elements in highly paid jobs, they are treated differently when they apply for a job in a top rated company in Bangladesh.

I want to particularly highlight here the presence of multiple standards in one education platform, which is simply unnecessary and misleading. I believe our education system at all levels should be supported by such a policy that will treat everybody equally and will be compatible for all.

The Way Forward

Now the question is, *“What is the way around to get rid of this situation?”* I believe the problems that are already in place, can only be solved with a planned solution package. The good news is that our Education Ministry has already formulated a new Education Policy in 2010 aiming to resolve some of these problems of proper synchronization. To me, the Policy looks promising; however, the true success of this Policy lies in its timely and effective implementation.

About the Author

Mr Khaled Bin Kamal is now working as an Operational Risk Manager at Standard Chartered Bank Plc. He obtained his Bachelor Degree in Business Administration from the Department of Finance, University of Dhaka. He started his professional career with Nestle Bangladesh Ltd. in 2005. His professional areas of expertise include risk management, financial analysis and corporate lending. Since January 2011, he is voluntarily involved with the activities of IDEAS FOR DEVELOPMENT (IFD) as a Reviewer.