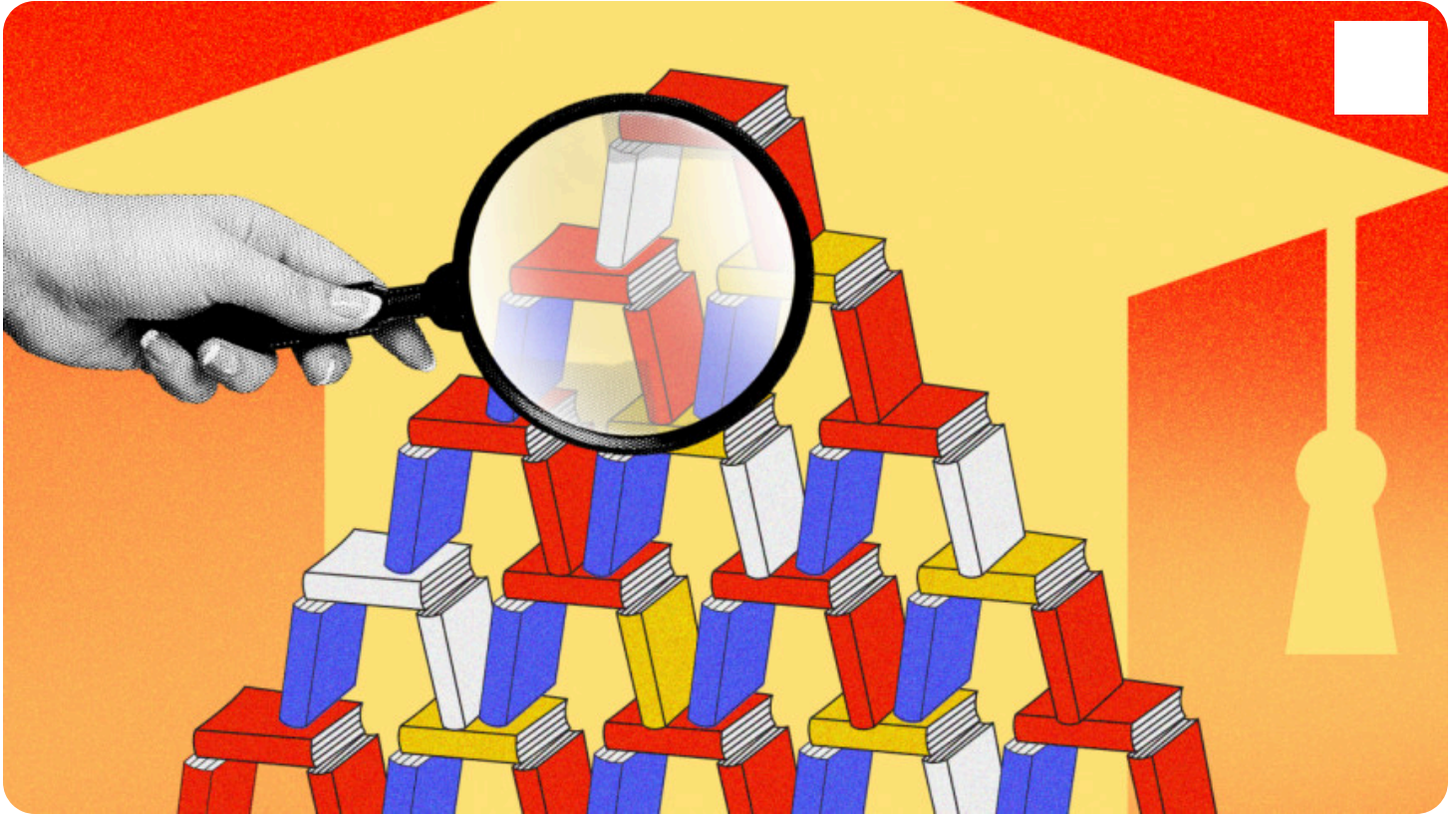


Why is there no education commission yet?



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

The interim government installed on August 8, 2024 through a youth-led popular uprising, and headed by the most globally acclaimed living Bangladeshi, Nobel Laureate Prof Muhammad Yunus, is committed to pursue an agenda of "state repair." Students and the public, chhatra-janata, who toppled the oligarchic and kleptocratic regime, want to ensure that the state in the future serves the people, not a self-serving cartel.

In a speech on September 11, Prof Yunus announced the formation of [six independent commissions](#) to introduce reform in the constitution, electoral system, judiciary, police, Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), and public administration. The commissions have been asked to provide their recommendations in three months regarding actions, which will be followed by public dialogue on the recommendations. On October 31, formation of [five more commissions](#) were announced, for reforms in health, mass media, workers' rights, local government, and women's affairs. The 11 commissions are expected to address major areas of state policies, responsibilities and services, which are vital elements of state repair.



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In the face of dysfunctionality in all areas of public services, other various reform efforts have been initiated by the respective authorities, such as the committee to prepare a white paper on the economy and the National Board of Revenue (NBR) task force on income tax law. On September

30, the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education **appointed a consultative committee** to advise on improving primary and non-formal education quality, pedagogy and management structure. This author has been named the convener of the committee.

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Whom does education serve in Bangladesh?



We might remind ourselves that the student-led uprising originated from discriminatory rules for public service jobs, and more broadly education and training not paving the path to decent jobs and livelihood for a majority of students. Because of various streams with unequal standards and access to these based on family economic status, education is not a ladder for intergenerational transition to a better life. Instead, schools have become a way of entrenching existing disparities, limiting opportunities and prospects for most children.

A broadly accepted education policy formulated in 2010, still supposed to be operational, envisaged unified school experience of acceptable quality for all children, motivated and capable teachers, and decentralised and responsive education governance. The policy also foresaw relevant middle- and higher-level skills development and preparing competent professionals, academics and researchers through expanding higher education of acceptable standards. The policy made compromises by accepting the multiple streams of school education of varying standards and serving varying objectives. It also remained vague about how its objectives might be realised. And like its predecessors, the regime that was in power since 2009 did not make any systemic and serious effort to implement the policy.

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An education memorandum



Education development, therefore, remained fragmented, lacking a comprehensive vision, characterised by partial and reactive response to the ongoing operational problems. On top of it, narrow political and factional interest led to decisions and actions, which had little to do with realising and serving the goals of education and the interest of children and the nation.

The consequences of the disarray in the system are that, as people can vent their grievances now, students, teachers and various vested interests are raising all kinds of demands, sometimes forcibly and resorting to violence. Some of these demands call for urgent action, others need to be considered judiciously, but all have consequences for the whole system which cannot be ignored.

Cases in point are abandoning unfinished parts of this year's HSC exams, wholesale forsaking of recent curricular work and textbooks and returning to 2012 learning materials, appointments made in public universities in the old ways rather than with transparency and publicly stated and applied criteria, and decision-making dominated by ministry bureaucrats. Some of them have little understanding of the nuances of education or are keen to pursue a self-seeking agenda as in the old regime. Just sending out circulars and orders from the capital to all corners of the country is still the preferred solution to problems. The people and their habits have not changed.

Why is there no commission yet for reform in the vital education sector? Is it too complex, difficult to generate consensus on important issues? Would a commission stoke more controversies and divisions in society than the interim government is willing to face? These are legitimate concerns. But these concerns apply to all the other commissions appointed by the government.

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Reforms required in Bangladesh's school system



The National Education Policy of 2010, recognising the complexity and sensitivities of the sector, recommended the creation of a permanent statutory commission on education, which would guide implementation strategies of the policy, monitor progress, and keep the national parliament and the public informed about the state of education in the country. The previous regime characteristically did not want such a public spotlight on its activities. Perhaps it could appoint a commission with its own chosen people that would not serve public interest, as happened with other statutory bodies. The interim government need not and should not follow this tradition. Shoving critical problems under the carpet should not be the way.

A commission on education, chosen with care, can advise the interim government and serve the nation in the following areas, among others:

- i) Guiding the discussion and steps towards an education sector plan with a 10-year time frame and greater specificity for five years. Initial work was done in this respect with both the ministries' participation and with support from UNESCO and Global Partnership for Education in 2020, but the government failed to follow it up.
- ii) The sector plan would pay special attention to a time-bound programme and strategy for universal primary and secondary education, effective and market-linked vocational education and training, employment-responsive four-year colleges under the National University, and university expansion rigidly applying quality criteria.
- iii) New thinking about teachers and education workers for school education with the aim of attracting to and retaining the best talents in teaching.
- iv) Responsive, accountable, and decentralised education governance and management with effective use of education resources and substantially increased public investment.

- v) Helping articulate government position on external assistance areas and priorities aligning with the proposed sector plan and strategies for various subsectors.
- vi) How the education budget for FY25, the first budget prepared by the interim government, should reflect the spirit and the goals in education of the youth-led state repair agenda.

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Of rivers and people



The education commission should probably function somewhat differently in two ways. First, the government can seek its advice and rely on its deliberation on various ongoing sensitive issues, such as the demands of the seven government colleges in Dhaka for redressing their various long-ignored grievances. Secondly, anticipating a permanent education commission, the committee appointed now could have public dialogue on the nature, role and composition of said permanent body and continue to serve as a commission until a permanent commission is formally established.

The formation of an education commission would be a way to honour and repay a small part of the debt owed by the nation to the martyrs and those injured in the July-August uprising.

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