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# The long road to educational recovery

HM Nazmul Alam  22 May, 2025, 00:00



THE lingering crisis in Bangladesh's tertiary education system, nearly a year after the student-led uprising of July and August 2024, paints a bleak picture of institutional dysfunction, political inertia and squandered opportunities. What began as a popular movement to address perceived injustices in the quota system and an unpopular pension reform quickly spiralled into a national reckoning with decades of educational mismanagement. Yet, despite the sweeping changes in government and academic leadership that followed, the promised renewal has failed to materialise. The country's universities, colleges, polytechnics and nursing institutes remain caught in a cycle of protests, closures and administrative paralysis.

This prolonged state of disruption is not a result of a single issue but the accumulation of systemic neglect, exacerbated by political partisanship, short-term policy thinking and a glaring absence of academic leadership. The upheaval that followed the regime change in August 2024 led to the resignations or removals of dozens of senior university officials — vice-chancellors, pro-vice-

chancellors, registrars, treasurers, and more — across numerous institutions. While these changes were initially hailed as necessary corrections, they have left a vacuum in leadership that has yet to be effectively filled. In many cases, newly appointed administrators have struggled to assert authority, resolve long-standing grievances or restore confidence among students and faculty.



Even as academic activities resumed in many institutions within four months of the uprising, tensions persisted and eventually reignited. From Dhaka University to KUET, from nursing institutes to polytechnics, student protests have continued unabated. Their demands have ranged from ensuring safety on campus to the recognition of academic credentials and improved residential facilities. These protests, frequently taking the form of road and railway blockades, sit-ins and marches, have not only disrupted public life but also deepened the sense of instability surrounding the education sector.

The lack of a clear, coordinated response from academic authorities and the government has only added to the disarray. In cases like KUET, where violent clashes between student groups led to a complete suspension of academic activity for nearly three months, institutional responses were slow and reactive. Even when leadership changes were made in response to student demands, faculty members refused to resume teaching, citing their own grievances and concerns about safety. This multi-layered crisis — where both students and teachers are engaged in prolonged resistance — reflects a profound erosion of trust within the academic community.

At the core of this dysfunction lies the absence of effective academic leadership. Institutions that should be driven by merit, critical inquiry and collective responsibility have become deeply politicised and increasingly incapable of self-correction. Teacher associations, which should have been pivotal in navigating this transitional period, have largely remained silent or entangled in partisanship. Their

inability or unwillingness to act as mediators between students and administrators has further undermined the credibility of institutional governance.

The national authorities have also failed to demonstrate the urgency and foresight that this crisis demands. While new vice-chancellors and other administrators have been appointed, there appears to be no coherent strategy to restore academic normalcy or address the underlying causes of student unrest. Instead, responses have been fragmented, often focusing on immediate appeasement rather than long-term reform. The interim government, too, has struggled to provide consistent oversight or support, hampered by its own organisational challenges and limited mandate.

This sustained disruption in higher education is occurring at a time when Bangladesh faces an even more critical, long-term challenge: harnessing its demographic dividend. With a rapidly growing youth population, the country has a limited window — approximately 15 years — to turn this demographic advantage into a catalyst for national development. But the current trajectory suggests that this opportunity may be squandered.

The country's performance on the World Bank's Human Capital Index offers little cause for optimism. A child born in Bangladesh today is expected to be only 46 per cent as productive as they could be with full education and health. This figure is lower than the regional and global averages for comparable economies, indicating a persistent underdevelopment of the country's human capital. The problem is compounded by high rates of youth disengagement. According to the most recent labour force survey, about 22 per cent of Bangladeshi youth are neither in education, employment nor training. Alarmingly, nearly two-thirds of this group are women, suggesting deep-rooted gender disparities and structural barriers to inclusion.

Bangladesh's education sector has, over the past few decades, made commendable strides in some areas. Universal primary enrolment, gender parity at primary and secondary levels, and nationwide textbook distribution are achievements worth acknowledging. Programmes like the Compulsory Primary Education Act, Food for Education, and the Primary Education Development Programme have played key roles in expanding access to education. These initiatives, often implemented with the support of development partners and NGOs, helped the country achieve several "low-hanging fruits" in human development.

However, the same cannot be said about the quality of education or the capacity of the system to adapt to evolving economic and social needs. Learning outcomes remain dismally low, especially in rural areas. More than half of children in the country are unable to read and comprehend a simple text by the age of 10, highlighting the superficiality of educational access. Without a strong foundation

in early education, students continue to struggle as they advance through the system, resulting in poor academic performance, high dropout rates and limited employability.

The failure to invest meaningfully in education is a key reason behind this stagnation. For more than 15 years, Bangladesh's education budget has hovered around or below 2 per cent of GDP — far below the 6 per cent recommended by UNESCO. This chronic underinvestment has left schools and universities ill-equipped, teachers underpaid, and curriculums outdated. It has also stifled innovation and research, limiting the country's ability to compete in a knowledge-based global economy.

Moreover, policy inconsistencies and a lack of sustained follow-up mechanisms have rendered many education reforms ineffective. The rollout of initiatives such as the universal pension scheme, though well-intentioned, has often lacked proper consultation and implementation planning. The widespread teacher protests that followed the announcement of the “Prattay” pension scheme exposed the disconnect between policy-makers and educators. The eventual withdrawal of the scheme did little to repair the damage, as trust between the government and the teaching community remained fractured.

What is perhaps most troubling is the broader cultural attitude towards education policy in Bangladesh. Success is often measured in terms of enrolment numbers or infrastructural milestones, rather than learning outcomes or institutional resilience. Political patronage continues to dominate academic appointments, undermining meritocracy and further eroding institutional autonomy. Students and faculty alike are frequently caught in the crossfire of larger political battles, leaving little room for meaningful dialogue or reform.

Despite these challenges, there is still time to alter the course. A revitalised education strategy must begin with a substantial increase in funding, aimed not just at expanding access but at improving quality across all levels of education. This includes investing in teacher training, upgrading facilities, reforming outdated curriculums and fostering a culture of research and critical thinking.

Depoliticising academic institutions is also essential. University governance structures must be reformed to ensure transparency, accountability and academic independence. Leadership appointments should be based on credentials and experience, not political loyalty. Teacher associations must also rise above factionalism and reclaim their role as stewards of academic integrity.

Engaging students in policy-making processes can also help bridge the growing divide between authorities and the youth. Providing platforms for constructive dialogue, creating mechanisms for

grievance redressal, and integrating student perspectives into curriculum and campus policy design are necessary steps to rebuild trust.

Finally, a comprehensive approach to youth employment is needed to address the NEET crisis. This includes expanding vocational training, creating internship and apprenticeship programmes, and offering incentives for industries to hire young workers. Special focus should be placed on empowering female youth through targeted interventions in education, skills training and entrepreneurship.

Bangladesh stands at a pivotal moment. The decisions made now will determine whether the country can transform its youthful population into a demographic dividend or face a future burdened by disillusionment and lost potential. The crisis in tertiary education is not just an institutional problem — it is a national emergency. If the country continues to treat it with indifference or piecemeal solutions, the consequences will be far-reaching and irreversible.

There is a pressing need for vision, leadership and commitment. The clock is ticking — and with it, the hopes of an entire generation hang in the balance.

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