

Education sector yet to return to normalcy

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File photo shows students attend classes at Khodeza Khatun Government Primary School in Banglamotor area in Dhaka. | Shahin Akhter

Normal academic atmosphere in the education sector from primary to tertiary levels is yet to be restored in the country, even after a year of the student-led mass uprising in July and August in 2024.

Crisis of teachers, damaged relationship between teachers and students, movements by the students and the teachers and no governing bodies and managing committees in many non-government educational institutions are creating disorder in the sector, said educationists and researchers.

They also mentioned learning losses, indecision regarding the national curriculum, dropouts, less budget, and no reform commission for the sector as other significant crises for the sector.

The authorities should take immediate action to bring back the students to the classrooms and take different reform plans for overall and long-term improvement in the sector, they added.

Immediately after the uprising, the interim government cancelled Higher Secondary Certificate and equivalent examinations after holding seven examinations, as a section of the examinees stormed into the secretariat on August 20, 2024 for the cancellation of the examination, Campaign for Popular Education executive director Rasheda K Choudhury said.

'If the policymakers could have taken stern action at that time, we would not have to see the current disorderly situation in the education sector,' she said.

From that moment, a section of errant students got the message that they could do 'whatever' they want to realise their demands, she said.

She said that the present scenario had occurred due to the lack of the government's timely actions.

The Awami League regime was ousted on August 5, 2024, amid a student-led mass uprising, and the interim government was sworn in on August 8, 2024.

The mass uprising resulted in the closure of educational institutions, subject mapping for the HSC results, session jam in tertiary level, vacancy in educational institutions due to forced resignations, learning losses, returning to 2012 curriculum and delay in printing textbooks for 2025 educational year.

Frequent movements by the students and teachers of almost all levels for realising different demands, including salary hike, deferring public examinations, and passing students failed in examinations, also affected the sector heavily in the past one year.

Although the interim government has so far formed 11 reform commissions, it has yet to form any such commission for the reform of the education sector.

Currently, the country has about four crore students from pre-primary to tertiary levels, as per the Bangladesh Education Statistics 2022.

Most recently, on July 14, chief adviser Professor Muhammad Yunus has ordered immediate appointments to the 32,000 vacant positions of the head teachers in government primary schools.

As per the 2023 Annual Primary School Census, there are 65,567 government primary schools in the country, which means 48.8 per cent or around half of these schools are running without any head teachers.

‘Anxiety in the education sector from primary to secondary levels is still persisting even after one year of the movement,’ Dhaka University’s Institute of Education and Research professor Mohammad Ali Zinnah said.

The tendency of the gap between education policy and its realistic implementation and inclusion of partisan culture persisted in the sector from the previous governments, including the immediate past Awami League regime, he said.

‘The students are frequently holding movements to realise their demands, which is affecting the academic environment,’ he added.

Soon after the uprising, resignations of the vice-chancellors and other senior officials began as students at different universities gave them ultimatums to do so on allegations of aiding the deposed AL regime and the police to suppress the uprising.

The humiliation of some teachers at places drew huge criticisms as videos of some of the incidents went viral.

On August 20, 2024, the education ministry gave the divisional commissioners, deputy commissioners and upazila nirbahi officers the responsibility of chairing the governing bodies in all non-government educational institutions under the ministry.

On November 21, 2024, all of these educational institutions were asked to form ad-hoc committees. The ministry, on April 27, suspended the formation of the governing bodies and managing committees of all non-government educational institutions under the ministry across the country.

The educationists and the researchers, meanwhile, pointed out learning loss as a big crisis now.

‘We are yet to overcome the losses caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, while the learning loss intensified in the past one year,’ said Rasheda K Choudhury.

She also said that the government neither formed any reform commission for the sector nor did anything to implement the recommendations given by a government-formed committee focused on improving primary and non-formal education in Bangladesh.

The government recently took a decision to allow primary students to take stipend examinations by allowing 40 per cent of students from the classes, which would create discrimination and coaching business, she added.

Mostafizur Rahaman, deputy director (research and advocacy) of Campaign for Popular Education, an advocacy and campaign coalition in Bangladesh, said that the interim government did nothing by giving emphasis on the sector.

‘The government should have urged the students to go back to their classroom just after the movement, but that time had passed,’ he said and urged the government to form a clear action plan for everything, including the curriculum.

In 2024, the interim government decided to print textbooks for 2025 as per the 2012 curriculum instead of 2021 curriculum and introduce a new curriculum in 2026. Later this year, the government said that the new curriculum would be implemented from 2027.

The share of education in gross domestic product fell again for the sixth year in a row, which is evident from the proposed national budget for the financial year 2025–26.

Professor Mohammad Ali Zinnah also pointed at the low budget allocation for the sector and poor investment as two pressing issues.

‘We need multi-dimensional solutions for the sector with support from all stakeholders,’ he added.

The chairman of the Bangladesh University Grants Commission, Professor SMA Faiz, said that they were working to bring back normalcy in the tertiary level.

‘If the relationship between the teachers and the students improves, many problems will be solved,’ he added.

None of the advisers and secretaries to the ministries of primary and mass education and the education could be reached for comments.