When mark-sheets lie, students pay price

Students celebrate their success in the SSC exams. | Sony Ramani

IT BEGINS like a statistical fairy tale that no one really believes but everyone keeps hearing. Student fail examinations, sink into despair and, then, weeks later, resurface triumphantly with a GPA 5. It is not because they studied harder or the laws of mathematics changed, but someone finally bothered to count their marks properly. This year alone, 1,479 students who were declared unsuccessful suddenly passed after re-evaluation; 555 students came up with changed marks. These are not isolated anomalies. They are symptoms of a public examination system where negligence has quietly become the most influential examiner of all.

A staggering 226,000 students felt uncertain enough about their results to seek a review, collectively submitting 428,000 challenges. That so many young people must ask the government to re-check the numbers that define their academic future suggests a crisis far deeper than clerical errors. It is an indictment of a system that demands discipline from students but tolerates carelessness within its own ranks.

The Dhaka education board alone received 66,150 re-evaluation applications covering 136,506 papers. When the dust settled, 2,331 students saw their results change. Among them, 201 students came up with GPA 5 and 308 who were earlier unsuccessful passed. The change was so dramatic that one might wonder whether the re-evaluation unit discovered secret reservoirs of marks hidden in invisible ink.

The Cumilla education board processed 22,503 student applications challenging 42,044 papers; and ,587 results were changed. The Chattagram education board handled 22,595 applications covering 46,148 papers, eventually granting 393 students a second life from failure and awarding 32 students GPA 5. The education boards of Rajshahi, Jessore, Dinajpur, Mymensingh, Sylhet and Barishal followed the same pattern. Hundreds of had grades change, dozens had GPA 5. And, countless students suddenly discovered that the system had misjudged them the first time.

The highlight, or rather the embarrassment, came from the Jessore board, where one student went from failing the ICT examination to earning GPA 5 after the mechanical check. This transformation is officially attributed to simple ‘errors in marking transfer.’ If the errors can turn failure into success, one can only imagine what might emerge if the scripts were actually re-marking.

The boards insist that re-evaluation not involve re-marking. They merely verify whether all questions were marked, whether the arithmetic is correct, whether the marks were transferred properly to the OMR sheet and whether the bubbles reflect the correct totals. These are routine checks, not academic re-assessments. And yet, the routine checks have a miraculous talent for correcting catastrophic mistakes. One almost feels tempted to recommend that the mechanical verification process, not the original marking, should be declared the real examinations.

Behind the numbers lies a painful truth. Each correction represents a student who was failed not by their performance but by the adults responsible for evaluating them. The students who write their examinations with trembling hands must obey strict instructions. They must stay within margins, number their pages, draw diagrams neatly and avoid overwriting. But the examiners who hold their future are apparently afforded a much more generous margin for errors.

The marking process, repeated endlessly in official explanations, sounds rigorous. An examiner marks, another teacher reviews and a chief examiner oversees the final score. Yet, the outcomes tell different stories. This carefully layered process appears less like a system of safeguards and more like a system of shared assumptions, each relying on the next to notice mistakes and all ultimately failing to do so.

Academicians argue that if full re-evaluations were allowed, the number of corrected results would multiply dramatically. This quiet confession should alarm anyone who still believes in the credibility of public examinations. Instead, it is treated as an inconvenient, mildly embarrassing truth that requires no urgent restructuring.

The financial burden adds insult to injury. Students must pay to challenge their results, essentially paying to correct mistakes they did not make. Negligence has become a billable service. It is a cruel irony that the system profits from its own errors while the students, many already anxious, poor or struggling, shoulder the cost of institutional carelessness.

The psychological cost: the student who believe that they have failed must process the shame, the disappointment and the fear of an uncertain future. Only later do they learn that their failure was not academic but administrative. A corrected result cannot erase the weeks of agony that they endured. Negligence in this system is not an accident. It is a form of inflicted suffering.

The boards now promise improvements: training for evaluators, better supervision and advanced technology. The pledges surface every year, usually after the damage is done. But training cannot fix indifference, supervision cannot correct apathy and technology cannot save a system that refuses to hold people accountable.

The deepest danger is that this negligence becomes normalised. When thousands of results change every year, when failures morph into GPA 5 with a few strokes of re-calculation, when examinations boards treat this as routine administrative work, the public slowly adjusts to dysfunction. What should provoke outrage begins to feel ordinary. This erosion of trust is far more harmful than any single marking error.

The silent victims are the students who never apply for re-evaluation. They accept their results as final. Some give up on their dreams. Some change career plans. Some carry the weight of undeserved failure because they believe that the system would not betray them. Their suffering does not show up in statistics. Their stories remain unknown.

A country cannot demand excellence from its youth while offering mediocrity from its institutions. A system that punishes a student for misplacing a comma but excuses an examiner for miscalculating the total does not produce fairness. It produces resentment, disillusionment and distrust.

The stakes are enormous. Public examinations shape university admissions, scholarship, job opportunities and social mobility. When such a system becomes vulnerable to persistent error, the consequences ripple through a generation.

This year's re-evaluation results are more than a dataset. They expose a structural failure that recomposes mark-sheets but leaves deep wounds untreated. Until negligence is treated not as a technical flaw but as an ethical breach, the same pattern will return. Another batch of students will suffer. Another batch will pay to correct the mistakes of others. And another list of 'surprising' GPA 5 changes will be released the next year.

The mathematics of negligence has become predictable. And until the system relearns how to count, students will keep paying the price for the errors that were never theirs.

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