

## In Search of a New Normal for Higher Education

By Prof. A.K. Enamul Haque



If I remember well, it was 1994, the World Congress of Distance Education Institutions was being held in Hong Kong. Delegates from Open Universities across the world gathered to discuss the future of distance education. The challenges were many— how to reach the students with the right kind of tools? How to motivate them to study at home? How to mainstream distance education in higher studies?

### Distance Education Challenges were many:

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- How to motivate them to study at home?
- How to mainstream distance education in higher studies?

It was also my first introduction to distance education. At the time, I was in charge of developing study materials for the first Diploma in Management at the Bangladesh Open University – I was a new recruit in this arena – I was used to give lectures in classes – face to face. As such, it was a new domain for me. I was

keen to learn about this new mode of education. Princes Anne was speaking in her inaugural speech she said, “by the middle of the next century most of the universities will not find students in their campus”—it struck me by surprise! Is it going to be true? Then she explained—people will find it hard to stay on campus rather they will use distance mode of education to learn. Educators must prepare for this change.

As days gone by, innovations in technology starting from video to audio chatting, webinar facilities, MOOC and other technological advances have made it possible for people to consider a campus-less education more actively and probably it is not the end. Almost every mainstream universities have begun to deliver their education in dual mode— offline (face to face) and online. Virtual classroom, virtual whiteboard, virtual pen, are no longer something that we imagine but we also use them actively in our courses. Educational technology has made it possible to change our attitude towards education.

However, what kept me wondering is not the mode of delivery of education rather what we teach in our classes. Education and particularly higher education must change to fit to the new needs of the society. We must ask few fundamental questions to ensure that the education is valuable to human society.

What is the purpose of education? Is there a macro and a micro purpose of education? How the curriculum shall be designed? How shall we select our faculty members etc. etc.? I do not have answers to all these questions but I have my

thoughts on this and I will share them with you in this piece of writing.

**Firstly**, after the end of colonial era, the newly independent countries used education (primary and secondary) to integrate their nation. Many of these new countries were not created by their King and hence their boundaries were not based on any principle of culture, language, religion, race, tribe, etc. It was the theory of convenience of the colonial rulers who drew our boundaries based on how best to administer the colonies. As such, the biggest challenge for these new countries was to use education to create nationhood. In doing so the challenges were many. Choice of language for education was a big bottleneck. Countries ruled by colonial masters were not used to use their own language in offices. English became an effective alternative in many countries given their difficulties in communication with each other. History was a contentious matter. Hundreds of years of colonization destroyed our pride, our thought process and our politeness. Asia and Africa after the colonial era became synonymous for poverty, hunger, and illiteracy. We began think the West as the savior – a different kind of savior. During the colonial era they were the masters, now they are the source of our knowledge!, our dream and our aspirations. Let us accept that this is what a 'foreign' education system can provide. Mind you, I am not calling them 'western' education system. Have you ever wondered why Messi, Maradona, Kaka, Neymar, Suarez, and many others from Nigeria, Egypt, Senegal never planned to migrate to Europe leaving their country behind! This is also true for our cricketers, and many other players, musicians of the region but it is not true for most of our highly intellectual and meritorious students! They all seem to plan for an exit route to leave their respective countries as soon as an opportunity arises!

**Secondly**, education has both a purpose of self-fulfillment as well as a purpose of contribution towards nation building.

Clearly, when meritorious students leave en-masse the nation-building purpose has failed. The remaining question is – whether our education has contributed to the self-fulfillment prophecy? To answer this question, we need to ask few more questions? Did the education help me to achieve my goals of life? Can I take a detour in case I find that the current route is not what I want? Mind you, we have only one life – shall I die without fulfilling my aspiration?

An education system based on 'rules of prohibition' cannot serve our aspiration. Imagine that I want to be a doctor and an engineer at the same time. Can I do it? Answer is no. Imagine a situation when I became a doctor and then realized that I should have been a Professor of Philosophy. It is where I have my comparative advantage – where I can contribute. In our education system it is simply impossible. I believe the education system shall be free from such draconian rules. It shall be flexible and accommodative to help us become what we want to be and not to tell us what we should be.

**Thirdly**, what is education? Is it fulfillment of credit hour requirements? Is it completing a check-box of courses? It should not be and yet it is how we have developed our system. Education shall be based on outcomes – not based on a process like how many courses? How many credit hours? At the end when I obtain a degree shall I be half qualified? When we pass with 50% marks what does it mean? Shall we consider that we have learned 50% of the prescribed knowledge? Shall I call myself a half-economist because I got 50% marks in the exam? Or a three-quarter-economist when I get 75% marks? A process based education cannot be a complete education. It has to be outcome based. The best example of such outcome based education that exists today is in medical colleges. Have you ever seen a 'first class' doctor and a 'third class' doctor? The answer is no – because medical education is still an outcome based education. You will also see this outcome based education in religious

schools. You will never find a half-Moulvi or half-Hafeez-al-Quran in Islamic education system which is very old.

In absence of outcome based education the difficulty comes during the process of cross-recognition. National education schemes, which were developed to integrate nations failed to provide a pathway to develop cross-recognition of these degrees across the boundaries.

The twenty-first century is a globalized century. It is a century where people are no longer separated by language, culture, religion, or other technology barriers. It is a century where mobility across the globe will increase much more than any other centuries of the past. Therefore, our education system must create a new norm to fulfill the aspirations of today's generations.

**Fourthly**, the process based education system has also corrupted the complete system. Our teachers are no longer interested to solve a social problem for which they are historically respected in the society. Their primary goal is to 'publish' and publish topics which are in most cases useless in nature, repetitive, repackaged the existing knowledge and rarely creates any new knowledge.

Our primary method of quality assurance is to use 'impact factors' to 'judge' our research quality. We are now blind in terms of what the real problem of the society is or what the needs for research in the society are where we live. We are praised, raised and even rewarded for publishing in many useless 'journals'.

Let me list a few articles from some of the top journals in the region – “Philips curve in a small economy – a time series exploration”; “Factor substitution and Technical Change in Agriculture”; “An empirical analysis of Q-factor model–evidences from stock exchanges”.

There are many similar articles published and rewarded by the system but they fail to take account of the real problem of the society. As such many of our educated youths are now unfit for jobs. The real world (who are private employers) are looking for a person who is productive in terms of knowledge and skills which our education system has not fully addressed yet. We need students to develop ability to solve problems of the society, not to provide a memorized version of the problem and solutions!

**Finally**, we are still debating – is it an online degree or not? We are not asking whether he or she 'knows' his/her subject? We are saying xx credit hours are important – convert your education into credit hours. We do not want to see whether it was taught in the class or not. We are still working on an education system to exclude people and not to include them to become a good citizen, a thinker and a philosopher so that they help make our society a better one.

The twentieth century education must be based on a new paradigm. It is an education system to develop our human capital (not human graduates) who will help Asia and Africa to compete with the rest of the world. It has to be an education system which is flexible to help individuals fulfill their dreams. This is a new century where Asia is again going to be the center of the universe and so we need to create our ability to sustain it. The new education system shall be global in nature to create good global citizens so that we live a world where racial, cultural or religious hatred is part of past history, the new education system must be ready to ensure mobility of people across boundaries and to pursue innovation and creation of new knowledge. It is based on set of educational outcomes recognized by all, not a set of process where the graduates are half or quarter educated.

*Professor A.K. Enamul Haque is teaching Economics in East West University, Dhaka, Bangladesh and he was the founder Dean of the School of Business, Bangladesh Open University, Gazipur, Bangladesh. He can be reached at [akehaque\[at\]gmail\[dot\]com](mailto:akehaque[at]gmail[dot]com)*