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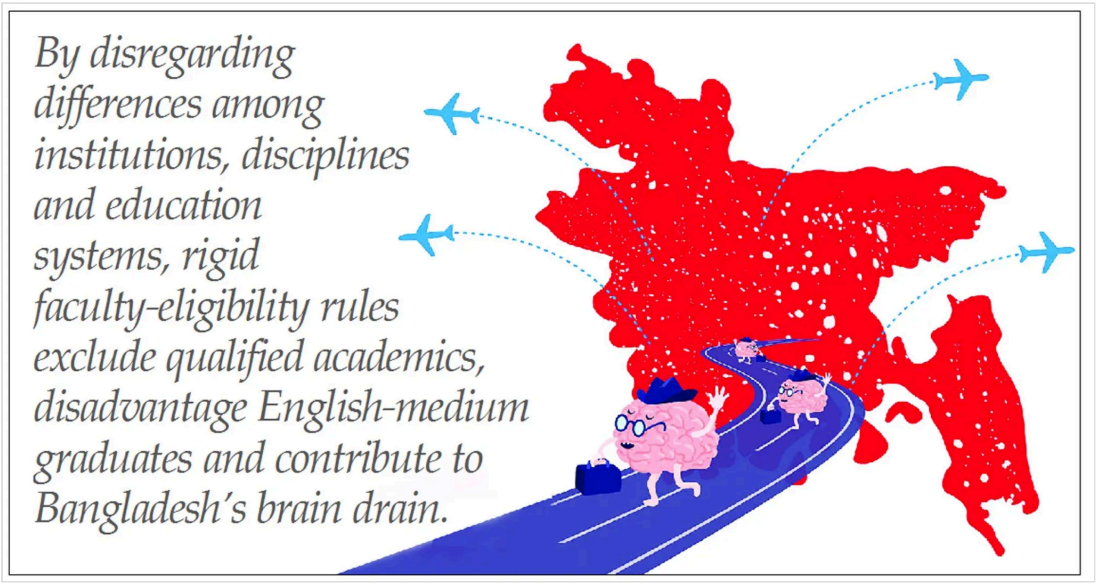
Commentary

UGC'S GPA RULES ARE DRIVING AWAY THE TALENT BANGLADESH NEEDS

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By disregarding differences among institutions, disciplines and education systems, rigid faculty-eligibility rules exclude qualified academics, disadvantage English-medium graduates and contribute to Bangladesh's brain drain.

Bangladesh frequently speaks of reversing brain drain and encouraging internationally educated citizens to return home.

Yet the University Grants Commission's rigid faculty-qualification requirements can have precisely the opposite effect.

They may prevent highly qualified Bangladeshi graduates of foreign universities from even being considered for academic positions in their own country.

Faculty eligibility is often determined by minimum results at every stage of a candidate's education—SSC or equivalent, HSC or equivalent, undergraduate degree and graduate degree. This may be administratively convenient, but it is academically unsound.

A grade is not a universal measure of academic ability. A CGPA of 3.5 from one university cannot automatically be treated as equivalent to a 3.5 from another.

Institutions differ greatly in academic rigour, curricula, assessment methods, grading cultures and the quality of competition.

Yet the prevailing requirements make little meaningful distinction between a demanding programme at a leading global university and a generously graded programme at an institution ranked outside the global top 1,000.

Oxford illustrates the difficulty of such comparisons. It does not ordinarily award American-style GPAs; it uses degree classifications and subject-specific examinations.

Any conversion of an Oxford result into a four-point GPA is necessarily an approximation.

At Oxford and similarly demanding institutions, top classifications may be achieved by only a limited proportion of students in a particular programme.

Treating a converted result from such a system as interchangeable with a CGPA from a much less demanding institution is methodologically indefensible.

The same problem exists across disciplines. In the United States, grades are not distributed uniformly among subjects.

Students in quantitative, laboratory-intensive and natural-science fields have often received lower average grades than students in many other fields.

Grading patterns in business, economics, the humanities and social sciences may be quite different, depending on the university and programme.

A single CGPA threshold can consequently penalise candidates for studying a more strictly graded subject or attending an institution that resists grade inflation.

It rewards the number without examining the achievement represented by that number.

A policy that intensifies brain drain

The consequences go far beyond unfair recruitment. These rules directly undermine Bangladesh's efforts to attract internationally trained academics.

Consider a Bangladeshi student who completes O-Levels and A-Levels, earns a degree from a highly selective foreign university and then pursues advanced study or research abroad.

That person may begin considering a return to Bangladesh—perhaps out of family ties, professional commitment or a genuine desire to contribute to the country's universities.

The absurdity is easiest to see in an extreme but entirely plausible case.

A Bangladeshi may perform poorly in an O-Level or HSC examination at 16, later gain admission to Harvard and ultimately earn a PhD.

Even after demonstrating ability at one of the world's leading universities, that scholar could still be disqualified from consideration by a Bangladeshi university because of a school result obtained during adolescence.

A screening rule that produces such an outcome cannot credibly be described as a measure of faculty quality.

But if an old school result or a university GPA falls slightly below a rigid UGC threshold, the candidate may discover that a Bangladeshi university cannot appoint him or her regardless of the quality of the degree, research

record, teaching ability or subsequent professional accomplishments.

The rational response is obvious: the candidate remains abroad or moves to another country where academic appointments are based on the complete record.

Bangladesh then loses not only an individual teacher but also the research networks, international collaborations, new teaching methods and professional experience that the person could have brought home.

A regulation ostensibly intended to protect faculty quality thus becomes an institutional contributor to brain drain.

This is especially damaging because academics who establish careers abroad become progressively harder to attract back.

Once they obtain stable employment, research funding and professional networks elsewhere, Bangladesh's opportunity to benefit from their expertise may be permanently lost.

The country cannot credibly invite its diaspora to return while maintaining rules that disqualify its members before a university is even permitted to evaluate them.

The system also appears structurally discriminatory towards Bangladesh's growing English-medium school population.

These students pursue internationally benchmarked qualifications such as O-Levels, A-Levels and the International Baccalaureate Diploma.

These are rigorous programmes, frequently involving externally assessed examinations, demanding subject specialisation, extended writing, laboratory work and, in the case of the IB, a substantial combination of coursework, examinations, research and extracurricular requirements.

Nevertheless, their results must be forced into an SSC-HSC equivalence framework that was not designed for them.

O-Levels, A-Levels and the IB do not correspond perfectly to Bangladesh's national curriculum in their structures, subject combinations, grading scales or stages of assessment. A-Level students commonly specialise in a

small number of demanding subjects.

IB students take courses across several subject groups at different levels, complete an extended essay and fulfil additional core requirements.

Reducing these records to a mechanically calculated Bangladeshi GPA can erase much of the information they contain.

The problem becomes even more pronounced for Bangladeshis educated abroad.

Many education systems do not have a national board examination corresponding to the SSC examination after Grade 10. In the United States, for example, there is no single national secondary-school examination.

Many private-school graduates receive school diplomas without sitting a government-administered examination in either Grade 10 or Grade 12.

The SAT and ACT, where taken, are university-admission tests—not national school-leaving examinations. Many American universities have also adopted test-optional policies.

A candidate may therefore possess an entirely legitimate school record and an excellent degree from a respected university without having anything that corresponds neatly to SSC or HSC results.

Why should the absence of a Bangladeshi-style examination, which the candidate's education system never required, become a barrier to teaching at a Bangladeshi university?

A policy created around one domestic educational pathway cannot fairly assess every international qualification.

By insisting otherwise, UGC places English-medium and internationally educated Bangladeshis at a systematic disadvantage.

The policy also rejects the possibility of intellectual development. A student may perform poorly at 15 or 17 because of immaturity, illness, family circumstances or an inadequate school environment.

The same person may later excel at university, complete a distinguished graduate degree, publish important research and become an outstanding teacher.

Under a rigid 'minimum at every stage' rule, however, that person may remain permanently disqualified because of an SSC, O-Level, HSC or A-Level result earned many years earlier.

Subsequent accomplishments cannot repair the supposed defect.
Universities should be places where intellectual growth is recognised. A system that refuses to recognise improvement contradicts the purpose of education itself.

It also excludes precisely the kind of person who may have the most valuable lessons to offer students: someone who overcame an unpromising beginning through discipline, maturity and perseverance.

The rules create a further perverse incentive. A Bangladeshi graduate of a highly selective global university with conservative grading may be declared ineligible, while a graduate of a much less selective foreign institution with generous grading passes the numerical test.

This may help explain why graduates of poorly ranked overseas institutions, including some institutions in Malaysia and elsewhere where high CGPAs may be easier to obtain, can satisfy formal faculty requirements more readily than graduates of more demanding universities.

The issue is not the nationality of any candidate. Malaysian graduates and all other international graduates should be assessed fairly.

The problem is a system that can reward grade inflation while penalising genuine academic rigour.

Far from favouring graduates of the world's leading institutions, therefore, the policy may be systematically biased against them.

A higher-education regulator should protect the public interest. It should prevent fraudulent institutions, uphold accreditation standards, require adequate infrastructure, enforce financial accountability and ensure that universities maintain credible academic processes.

It should not effectively sit on every university recruitment committee by deciding, through mechanical thresholds, which otherwise accomplished scholar may even be considered.

Academic departments are better placed to evaluate the standing and rigour of an applicant's institutions, disciplinary differences in grading, research record, publications, teaching ability, professional experience, recommendations and pattern of improvement.

UGC may publish benchmarks and recommended practices, but these should inform institutional judgment rather than replace it.

Strict mandatory standards are more defensible when government funds are directly involved.

For publicly financed appointments, scholarships and projects, UGC and the government have a legitimate responsibility to impose transparent minimum safeguards.

Even then, decisions should consider institutional context and the candidate's complete record rather than rely on a decontextualised number.

UGC cannot credibly act simultaneously as funder, regulator, policy adviser and participant in universities' internal operations without clear legal boundaries. Combining these roles creates conflicts and weakens institutional autonomy.

This is particularly important as Bangladesh reconsiders the structure of higher-education governance.

The government has expressed a commitment to reforming the sector and making the regulatory system more supportive and facilitative.

Yet policies inherited from the previous political regime continue to shape UGC's approach. Some of those policies were associated with attempts to extend bureaucratic control over private universities.

They should not be carried forward automatically under the banner of reform.

When regulations lack a convincing academic basis, ignore international differences and predictably favour certain educational pathways, the public is entitled to ask whose interests they serve.

Even the appearance that higher-education policy is being shaped by bureaucratic convenience or special-interest demands damages confidence in the system.

The government should act immediately. UGC should abolish GPA-based filtering of faculty candidates altogether.

No candidate should be automatically excluded because of a GPA or grade obtained at school, undergraduate or graduate level.

Grades may remain one item in a university's holistic assessment, but they must not operate as mandatory cut-offs imposed by the regulator.

Universities should instead be required to adopt transparent, peer-reviewed recruitment procedures and remain accountable for the quality of their appointments

They should evaluate the whole person: the rigour and standing of the institutions attended, research and publications, teaching ability, professional experience, recommendations, disciplinary context and evidence of academic growth.

Bangladesh also needs a credible framework for evaluating foreign qualifications. That framework must recognise institutional standing, disciplinary differences, grading practices and the distinctive structures of O-Levels, A-Levels, the IB and other international systems.

Universities should be permitted to consider exceptional candidates on the strength of advanced study, research, publications, teaching, professional achievement and demonstrated academic improvement.

No accomplished scholar should be permanently barred from university teaching because of one result obtained during adolescence.

UGC should regulate institutional integrity, not filter individual candidates or micromanage academic judgment.

Bangladesh will not reverse brain drain by asking its most qualified citizens to return and then declaring them ineligible. Nor will it improve faculty quality by worshipping cut-off numbers.

It will do so by recognising knowledge, achievement, intellectual growth and teaching potential wherever they are found.

(The author is a member of the board of trustees at IUB)