

Private universities vis-a-vis the role of the state

M HARUNUR RASHID

In a seminar held recently in a five-star hotel of the city, four of the country's leading private universities, North South University, Independent University of Bangladesh, American University of Bangladesh and East West University, initiated a discussion on the operation of the private universities and the role the state ought to play in the functioning of the country's 22 or so private universities. Funded by the UNESCO, the seminar had a distinguished educational administrator, UAG Usani, currently the Vice Chancellor of Quide-e-Azam University as the keynote speaker. Dr Abdul Moyeen Khan, the Information Minister addressed the inaugural session as the chief guest.

Mr. Usani is a former Education Secretary of Pakistan and has a wide-ranging experience in the formulation of legal instruments for the private universities in Pakistan. Unlike Bangladesh, Pakistan does not have an umbrella law to cover all the private universities. Private universities are under the jurisdiction of the provincial governments and are unique in the sense that each private university has to have

its own separate act which has to go through a complex process until it is approved by the Provincial State Assembly and signed by the Governor of the Province. It is only areas under the federal government that the centre can act in the chartering of a private university.

Like Bangladesh, the concept of private universities was alien to Pakistan too before the late 80's. In fact, with the nationalization of all educational institutions in Pakistan in 1973, education became a burden on the government as it entailed additional expenditure on the already strained persistings of the public sector. This had other damaging impacts on the growth of education in Pakistan. For one thing, it had stopped whatever potential education had for variety and diversity in its unhindered growth and for another, which is worse still, it pulled down centres of excellence to mediocrity. As the standard of education fell sharply, the need for opening doors wide open to the private sector in tertiary education was keenly felt in the mid-eighties. The first private university of Pakistan, The Aga Khan University, Karachi was chartered in the late 80s followed shortly by the

Private universities are often referred to as pariah institutions, but the notion itself is highly fallacious. Public universities have failed to cope up with the challenges of globalization. This is where the private universities have come in to build future leadership of the country. During the last ten years, private universities have given world-class education to tens of thousands of students who would otherwise have gone abroad for higher education putting much strain on the forex reserve of the country.

Lahore University of Management Sciences, both considered today as centres of excellence. Soon other entrepreneurs competed to fill the gap left by the senseless nationalization of education by a third world economy. Today, the number of private universities in Pakistan stands at 40 almost twice as many in Bangladesh.

In Pakistan, there is minimal interference by the government once a private university has been chartered. But as no government should completely wash its hands off after chartering a university, some moral responsibility is borne by the government in ensuring reasonable fees and quality of services rendered by the university. But the linkage is maintained not through the UGC or the education ministry, but through the Chancellor who in most cases is either the Governor of the Province or in federal areas, the President of the country. It is not mandatory, however, that the Governor/President becomes the Chancellor of universities. Aga Khan University or the Hamdard University has a Chancellor other than the Governor of the province. In these exceptional cases, the Governor is the patron of the university with limited power but without the power of visitation.

The Chancellor, where he happens to be the Governor/President has the powers to a) preside over a convocation ceremony, b) award degrees to graduates c) in case of irregularities and showcause, visit the university and d) nominate members to the Governing Boards.

Pakistan has recognized the changes that have taken place in a fast moving world. So the vice-chancellor of a university is not made to correspond with the Chancellor through any via media such as the UGC or the education ministry. This cuts through the traditional red tape and gains in much needed pace to keep up with the world, which is only a mouse click away. The traditional government with its unwieldy bulk is no longer relevant to the pace at which the world is moving. Hence Pakistan's decision to allow the VC of a private university to deal directly with the Chancellor gives it flexibility and speed to deliver an efficient and effective education. This concept of minimal interference by the government upholds the connotative essence of a university, which is its autonomy.

This is not to say that the UGC or the education ministry does not have anything to do with a private university. The UGC stipulates certain guidelines for a fresh applicant, namely physical conditions, academic potential, setting up of a trust/foundation/company etc. Once these are fulfilled, evaluation is done by three academics appointed by the UGC after which a no objection certificate is given. The proposal is then sent to the education ministry for vetting an appropriate decision by the cabinet. It is then initiated in the form of a bill in Parliament or state assembly. But once a proposal passes through these ordeals and it gets the assent of the Governor, a private university is not made to put up with much government interference in its management and governance.

Currently a special committee is examining some of the ways by

which the private universities could be made more efficient and more serviceable to a greater number of populations. The committee is considering a) curbing of the profit motive of the private universities to make the services available to a greater number of students across the social strata, b) remedying the insufficient safeguards in law, c) looking into ways of ensuring continuity of the institution and d) guaranteeing certain minimum physical facilities and qualifications of the academics. Over all, the main thrust of the recommendations are going to be liberalization of conditions to meet the challenges of the new century, which cannot be done under stereotyped conditions. This has got to be done because Pakistan, like other South Asian countries, has an increasingly expanding base of youth. If this youth force is educated properly it will give access to resource of knowledge and knowledge is going to create wealth.

This was how Mr Usani summed up the Pakistan experience in private universities. The Bangladesh experience was presented by Dr Hafiz GA Siddiqi, Pro Vice Chancellor of North South University in the afternoon session. What stood out in sharp contrast was the fact that unlike Pakistan where each university had its own charter, Bangladesh had an umbrella legislation for all the private universities, namely, the Private Universities Act, 1992. The Act makes the President of the country the Chancellor of the private universities. The state controls not just the commissioning of a private university; it retains over much control through the UGC and the education ministry since the vice-chancellor of the private university cannot deal directly with its chancellor. Once a private university is allowed to start functioning, it does not receive any grants from the government and has got to fend for itself. Even the usual tax rebate for charitable donations to schools and madrassahs is not allowed in case of these universities.

While a private university, once created, is allowed to function in Pakistan with minimal government control, a private university in Bangladesh is made to turn to the UGC to get its syllabi and courses approved by the UGC. Hiring of foreign faculty needs the approval of both the education and home ministries and is now a time-consuming affair. In fact, under present conditions, hiring of competent teachers from abroad has become nearly impossible. Further the initial capital for setting up a new university now stands at taka fifty million plus land which has got to be acquired within a stipulated period. This naturally has an effect on the fees charged which is deemed sky-high and elitist.

Dr Siddiqi felt, since private universities catered to the people who could afford such education, government should have some control over their functioning so that students are not cheated and get the value for the money they invest. But if the private universities are made to wriggle under the restrictions of the UGC and the education ministry, the desired speed in their growth and development may face serious set backs. A much better way, as has been prescribed by Dr

Moyeen Khan, the chief guest of the inaugural session, is deregulation. Once a new university fulfils the minimum conditions, it should be allowed to operate on its own in a highly competitive market. Keen competition is what is going to improve its standard. As to irregularities, they could be taken care of by the Chancellor's power of visitation. The Chancellor may appoint a secretary specially to deal with the cases of the private universities.

The wrap up session presided over by Professor Hafiz Siddiqi had a few distinguished speakers who came up with some valuable comments. Among the notables was Dr Majid Khan the erstwhile President of IUB. With Mr Muslehuddin Ahmed and late Dr Ali Ashraf, he happens to be one of the pioneers of private universities in Bangladesh. He very

emphatically stated that in matters of education there must not be any distinction between private and public enterprises. Private universities are often referred to as pariah institutions, but the notion itself is highly fallacious. Public universities have failed to cope up with the challenges of globalization. This is where the private universities have come in to build future leadership of the country. During the last ten years, private universities have given world-class education to tens of thousands of students who would otherwise have gone abroad for higher education putting much strain on the forex reserve of the country. The initiatives taken by some benevolent persons have created a good deal of knowledge and expertise from which the country has immensely benefited. So the

two streams should not be considered exclusive of each other, rather they are highly complementary. The Public universities have stopped the inflow of fresh blood; they are not willing to appoint any indigenous expert let alone a foreigner to improve quality of education. They have got stuck in their own groove and are far away from the mainstream education in a highly globalized world.

The seminar was a fruitful sharing of experiences and the UNESCO deserves thanks for bringing the right kind of people to interact on the subject at a time when a legal framework for the private universities has been proposed. Bangladesh have a lot to learn from the Pakistan experience if we want to go ahead with renewed vigour and energy.

In conclusion, we would like to bring the matter to the close attention of the Chancellor who himself is an academic of distinction. Private universities need dynamism for their growth, something that the UGC or education ministry with its traditional heavyweight outfit is incapable of handling. True, much friction and conflict has resulted from lack of

clear defining of relationship between the chief executive and the Board of Governors, but that could be taken care of if sincerity and goodwill are not lacking. The proposed legal framework makes very little distinction between the private and public universities and as such is entirely irrelevant to the private university situation. While it is true that private universities should not function as merely dignified coaching centres, it is also true that they are not expected to take over overnight the responsibility of investing their paltry resources in capital intensive and less market oriented areas of knowledge. The matter is urgent and needs the immediate attention of the Chancellor of private universities. Since it was Khaleda Zia's government which granted the first charter of the private universities, it ought to be one of her prime responsibilities to amend the same to suit the needs of the zooming global pace of which neither the UGC nor the education ministry is capable of keeping abreast of.

M Harunur Rashid, a former Director General of Bangla Academy, is currently a Professor of English at North South University.



All health information to keep you up to date ABC of blood pressure

Tick the following boxes if you have these symptoms:

- Do you eat foods high in salt?
- Do you smoke?
- Are you overweight?
- Do you do little or no exercise?
- Have either or both of your parents been diagnosed with high blood pressure?
- Are you over 60 years of age?

If you have ticked any of the above boxes, it is important to have your blood pressure checked and monitored on a regular basis.

For all adults over the age of 18 years, blood pressure levels are categorized as:

- λ 120/80 or less is considered optimal
- λ 120-130 and 80-85 is considered normal
- λ 130-139 and 85-89 is considered high-normal
- λ 140-159 and 90-99 is considered mild hypertension
- λ 160-179 and 100-109 is considered moderate hypertension
- λ 180/100 or higher is considered severe hypertension

Blood pressure varies considerably over the day and night and is influenced by thoughts and actions. At least three readings should be taken on different occasions to confirm high blood pressure. The availability of 24-hour ambulatory blood pressure monitoring is increasing and helps to show the blood pressure variability over the day and night. Your doctor may recommend a home blood pressure monitor or a 24-hour monitor if it is thought that your blood pressure may only rise when the readings are taken.

What Causes High Blood Pressure?

In about 10 per cent of cases, the cause of high blood pressure can be related to another medical problem that can be determined by your doctor.

For most people, there is no specific cause and it is likely to be associated with a combination of genetic and environmental factors.

Apart from the genetics inherited from our parents, our lifestyle habits and behaviours can modify most of the major factors associated with high blood pressure.

Be Active

Regular exercise has been shown to lower blood pressure in previously inactive people by about 5-10 mmHg.

Participating in activities like walking, swimming, cycling, and running for a minimum of three times a week for 30-40 minutes each time can make a difference to your blood pressure.

Eat Wisely

For every kilogram of body fat you lose you can reduce your blood pressure by 2 mmHg.

Reduce Salt Intake

This can help reduce your blood pressure and help your medication work better.

Alleviate Stress

Physical and emotional stress can influence blood pressure.

What Treatment is Available for High Blood Pressure?

For many individuals, medication is required to keep blood pressure under control even if the lifestyle factors have been addressed. There are a number of types of blood pressure medications available so discuss the choice of medication with your doctor. If you are on medication, take them as prescribed and discuss any changes in use with your doctor.

Next: ABC of fearache

Garfield®

by Jim Davis



TOM & JERRY By Hanna-Barbera

