THE state of our higher education has been under scrutiny by many. The University Grants Commission, academia, students, and also the press are asking a very simple question: Is the quality of education at the private universities OK? While nobody can answer this question with any degree of confidence (since no systematic research has been done), some (in power) claim that they have the answer. As a result, they are tightening the rope around the private university system, and, as such, suffocating it.

Good practices

Let me present a few good observations on private universities. First, the first private university in Bangladesh, North South University (NSU), took the first initiative in the country (outside a few technical universities) to initiate a credit-hour based education system in the country. They were also the first ones to tell the Bangladeshi community that there was a world of education outside the British system by accepting the North American system of education in the country. It is through their concerted effort that we have now accepted the credit-hour based education system.

Second, private universities were the first ones (after BUET) which made the Bachelor's degree as the terminal degree of studies, and made admission into Master's degree an optional choice with a higher entry requirement. The benefit is better quality Master's degree programs in the country, whose students are now accepted around the world.

Third, private universities have made the curriculum flexible to adapt to the changes in the market conditions. For example, it was due to our effort at NSU that the Master's in Development Studies was launched in the country for the first time.

Fourth, private universities have also established the practice that teachers should have at least two more degrees than their students (a widely practiced system in the North American system of education). And fifth, a few private universities have also included a mandatory research component in their Bachelor's programs, which public universities are yet to emulate.

Quality of education

It is true that the quality of education in all private universities is not the same, but neither is it in all public universities. Are the degrees given by the National University in Dinajpur and in Rangamati the same? You might, of course, argue that even if they are not the same they follow the same scale or grading system, so they are comparable. But are they? It is possible to prove that the success rate in securing jobs is not the same for students of all colleges with similar results. Consequently, it is a moot point that all universities will produce the same quality of graduates. Had it been so, then Harvard would not be Harvard. Oxford would not be Oxford.

It can still be argued that the universities must meet a common minimum standard, and for this one needs to ensure a quality assurance program. This is an argument I often buy, and I would like to emphasise that the need for supervision or overseeing of the private universities is as important as it is for public universities. Let us not forget that the standardisation process should be designed to guarantee a minimum standard only.

Critics also argue that it is for this reason that private universities are being "watched" by the University Grants Commission. While there is a valid reason for such activities of the UGC, let us not forget that the process is equally valid for public universities. At the same time, it can be argued that, despite all the efforts of the University Grants Commission, the quality of education in public universities is deteriorating fast, too. As such, we need to question the validity of the tools used by the government to monitor the quality of education.

What are these tools? Well, it is often not public in its entirety. Some of the tools used by UGC are: a) space, b) facilities (library, labs, co-curricular facilities, etc), c) quality of education for hiring faculty members, d) minimum quality of education for admitting students, e) uniform grading scheme, f) the curriculum, and g) ownership of land. Let us examine them one by one.

There is no requirement of **space** per student. There is, however, a minimum area requirement for starting a campus. On the other hand, many good private universities maintain a maximum class size to ensure quality of education. This is not used by UGC (because public universities will not be able to meet such a standard).

Facilities -- this includes lab, library, etc. Private universities provide easy access to these facilities, and they do it because they charge their students for using them. Good private universities use student clubs to organise co-curricular activities of the students. The UGC never takes account of such activities to measure the quality, rather it sees the presence or absence of the facilities. Does it matter whether a university has a play-ground, a swimming pool, or a stadium, if it is not used?

Such facilities are rarely used in public universities, and yet we believe that they are a measure of the quality of life in the campus. Moreover, private universities subscribe to internet libraries and e-journals,