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Educational quality can be ensured with or without land.

Unfortunately, we are fighting about the tools. We tend to make the tool inflexible, so that there is no upper class and lower class in education. As if we are going to make every university like Harvard. This strategy helps the weaker player in the system. I hope that the new UGC team understands this while evaluating the system of education.

Challenges ahead

The future of higher education in the country is, however, in deep trouble. Why? As of today, only 10% of the students passing HSC can enter the public university system. Moreover, if the public education system wants to keep this rate fixed in future then the government needs to establish 12-28 new public universities by 2025. At the same time, the annual growth in HSC students is within 3.25%, and it is likely to increase to 5-7% in future. If the trend continues then, by 2025, there will be 500,000 to 800,000 HSC students eligible for university admission (from a UGC report of 2005, in which I was a research member). The maximum number of students public universities will be able to handle (after the expansion) will be between 50,000 and 80,000. The rest will be looking for private universities. If we do not allow opening of more private universities (please do remember that it takes 6-10 years for a private university to establish a name in the market) then many of the guardians will send their wards abroad. It is important to understand the consequences of our decision today in terms of the future.

India is one of the countries which has understood this. It is now expanding its education system to accept the challenges. Singapore is another country which has been massively investing in higher education for the past five years, to cater to future demands coming from its neighbouring countries, including Bangladesh.

Some of us may even be foolish enough to think that the government will be able to do more than what has been suggested above. Today, 0.15% (not 15%) of GDP is spent on higher education in Bangladesh. At this rate, the government will need to spend between Taka 888 and 2,220 crore for university education. Possible? Today, for a student studying science subjects in Dhaka University, the cost is Tk 120,000 annually (including all costs except food), for business subjects it is Tk 95,000, and for other subjects it is Tk 78,000. The government pays 90% of the costs.

In terms of number of teachers, we will need between 3,000 and 5,000 qualified faculty members to meet the challenge. Are we listening? I guess not. We need to strengthen our university education in many ways. Where is the regular PhD program to create university teachers? Maybe the UGC should consider allowing private universities to bring a new standard in PhD programs in Bangladesh.

Clearly, we need to plan for the future. It has to be prudent, efficient and effective. Can we say that the government will be able to finance higher education as it has been doing until now? If not, then where is the contingency plan? Tuition fees in public universities will rise. Are the students ready for this? Moreover, the cost of higher education in terms of books, labs, etc will increase further.

Many countries in the world have developed student loan and scholarship programs to guarantee that meritorious students do not suffer due to high cost of education or lack of seats. Many countries have transformed their finest institutions into "graduate campus only," to contribute to the development of manpower needed to support the growing demand for teachers in the higher education system.

Is it not a shame to see that Dhaka University, established in 1921, does not have a regular PhD program? Many countries have revamped their higher education to strengthen research capabilities to meet the challenges of the future. Many countries have developed "research grant" programs to ensure development of knowledge. As we believe that Bangladesh is becoming a "middle-income" nation, it is important that our policy makers understand the requirement to live up to the expectation of a "middle income" country in terms of its need for higher education.

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