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Prioritising higher education



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FOR economic growth and overall national development the first and foremost pre-requisite is education. Illiteracy and non-availability of adequately educated manpower are the two major causes of underdevelopment. However, it is recognised that ensuring primary education for all is only a necessary but not sufficient condition. It needs to be complemented by higher education. While high literacy rate is fundamental requirement for a country's development, higher education virtually determines its social, political, economic and technological progress. A country not only needs universal primary education but it also needs a minimum number of highly educated scientists and professionals like engineers, doctors, ICT experts, etc. in addition to vocationally trained manpower.

Even to achieve a high literacy rate and to ensure sustainable quality of primary education, a nation must ensure an increasing supply of qualified teachers. The teachers of the primary schools are required to be educated and trained at the institutions of higher learning. Beside for ensuring economic growth at reasonably high rate, an increasing number of productive workforces including highly skilled experts in various disciplines are essential. These experts are the products of higher education. If we want to establish a society based on equity and justice, poverty must be alleviated and inequality between the rich and the poor reduced. This can possibly be done by the educated leadership in all professions.

If a society wants to empower women, they must be allowed to have easy and equal access to higher education. If we want to live a better life than our forefathers, we must be highly educated to be innovative, more productive and competitive in the global market. It is necessary to integrate national economy into global system to face the challenges of globalisation that has made the process

of development technology-driven and knowledge-driven. The success in integrating the national economy into the global system will depend on the success in creating specialised human capital which can only be done through the provision of higher education in different disciplines.

A country cannot become a really developed and industrially rich only by achieving 100 percent literacy rates. Even though it is functionally important to reach that plateau of full literacy. There are many countries that have achieved more than 90 percent of literacy rate but none of them is considered a highly developed industrialised country. Among these are Estonia, Cuba, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Albania, Palestine and Mongolia. The main reason for this is their inability to produce and use highly educated manpower, namely, scientists, researchers, physicians, engineers, managers, teachers, etcetera who are able to contribute to the country's development.

It is necessary to note that the output of primary and secondary (pre-12 year) education is the input of higher education (post 12-year education including vocational / professional training and research capabilities). If primary and secondary education system produces low quality output then the higher education system will not be able to produce high quality graduates, the necessary inputs for sustainable development. Similarly, if universities and colleges cannot produce high quality graduates to teach at the primary schools, the primary education system itself will suffer. This implies that both quality and quantity of primary, secondary and tertiary education are interdependent. Therefore, it is necessary to balance the priorities keeping in view the national priorities and global realities. In this age of globalisation the trend is to pursue knowledge-economy. In the present globalised knowledge-economy, the importance of tertiary education has increased tremendously. Bangladesh needs to formulate its new strategies to turn the country into a knowledge-

economy creating opportunities to higher level education, training and research.

Lessons from other developing countries

In many developing countries that have excelled in economic development, investment in higher education and R&D as a percentage of GDP is much higher than that in Bangladesh. It is to be noted that R&D expenditure is only a part of the total expenditure in higher education. Like investment in higher education, their investment in pre-12 year education is also high; therefore their literacy rate is very high. However, all these countries attach higher importance to tertiary education including R&D. For example, China believes that rapid scientific and technological development is possible only by increasing investment in R&D. Therefore, it has doubled its expenditures in R&D as a percentage of GDP by increasing from 0.7 percent in 2004 to 1.4 percent in 2006. It has also revamped its higher education system by updating and modernising academic programmes, pedagogy and laboratory research capacities significantly with an emphasis on the basic research for innovation and training of the R&D personnel. Similarly, Taiwan assigns highest priority to scientific and technological education. Its impressive GDP growth is attributed to its increased expenditure in higher education and R&D. Taiwan is implementing its "Program for Development of World Class Universities and Research Centers". Like China, Korea doubled its R&D expenditure during 1998-2002. It has further undertaken an ambitious plan to invest 3 percent of its GDP in R&D by 2010. It is interesting to note that in the rapidly industrialised countries including those mentioned above, it is the private business sector that invests more than the government in R&D. South Korea and Taiwan are good examples... For Bangladesh, the case of India is more relevant. India's phenomenal rise as economic power is greatly attributed to its assigning highest priority to high quality higher education, basic research, development of technology and vocational training. Although India's literacy rate is less than 68 percent it has virtually become economic superpower in South Asia. India's IITs and IIMs have set examples for other countries. The emphasis on IITs and IIMs given by India implies that for sustainable development a country simultaneously needs scientific, technological and managerial education and training. In addition to the several hundred State and 18 Central Universities, there is a network of research institutions that provide opportunities for advanced learning and research leading to the highest degrees in all disciplines. By operating its vast educational system, India has built-up a capacity to produce more than 500,000 engineers/scientists a year and thousands of doctors, medical researchers, agricultural scientists, managers, teachers, and other highly skilled personnel. All these highly educated personnel work as the prime movers of the country. India could not have gone so high had it not assigned top priority to higher scientific and tech-

nological education, basic research and vocational training. Bangladesh should learn from the experiences of South Korea, Taiwan, China, and India. One must note that none of these countries assigned any lower priority to universal primary education. However, unlike Bangladesh, they simultaneously gave high priority to higher education.

Public-Private Partnership

While balancing its priorities between pre-and-post 12-year education, Bangladesh should also reform its strategies to ensure effective promotion of higher education. Such prioritisation calls for intensive exercise and elaborate planning. In addition to proper planning, the implementation of such plans requires huge amount of financial resources which the government of Bangladesh cannot afford. It is true that in our national budget highest allocations are made for the education sector. But although it was highest relative to other sectors, the allocation was too little to meet the requirements for all sub-sectors of education, particularly for tertiary education. The allocation for higher education is only 0.12 percent as a percentage of GDP. If one separates out the public fund available for research it would be too meagre to be mentioned.

Since public sector will never be able to provide the necessary amount for higher education, the government must take the responsibility to create and maintain an enabling environment so that private individuals and foundations (the potential founders of private universities) are motivated to establish private institutions of higher learning and vocational training. Happily enough, the government has to some extent succeeded in motivating private individuals and non-profit trusts. By virtue of this 51 private universities have been established. About 1,20,000 students are now studying in these universities. But many founders believe that the government instead of playing the role of facilitator wants to play the role of the controller. The passing of the Private Universities Ordinance 2008 indicates that a confrontational relationship will emerge between the government and founders of the universities. This alleged adversarial relationship must end if quality education is to be provided by the private sector. One must note that without public-private partnership based on cooperation and mutual trust the demand for higher education cannot be met. To nurture public-private partnership the government must encourage private investment through suitable policy instruments like official recognition of the noble mission of the founders of the universities, granting tax incentives, provision of credit at lower rate of interest, granting of Khas land for constructing campus, and pursuing the policy of least intervention in the management of private universities.

Besides, there should be public-private partnership to create large endowment to develop research facilities at the universities. The corporate sector should build up a new culture for promoting basic research capacity in collaboration with universities. The govern-

ment needs to formulate policy that will encourage public-private joint research initiatives.

Conclusion

It is high time to give higher priority to tertiary education otherwise Bangladesh will not be "Digitised Bangladesh" by 2021. But it does not mean that we neglect pre-12 year education. Rather, it is both pre-12 year education and post-12 year higher education in all relevant disciplines including research and professional training for a relatively small number of people that should get their due priority.

Universal primary education should continue to be a national goal. Along with this, perhaps at least 50 percent of the adult population should get secondary and 30 percent higher secondary education. Apart from this a minimum, say 10 percent of the adult population should get post-12 year education. These suggested percentages are to be refined through research. However, it must be noted that unlike primary education, higher education is only for a limited number of highly talented and meritorious persons who are qualified to study at an institution of higher learning. If some members of this group cannot get access to higher education because they are financially disadvantaged, it is the responsibility of the government and founders of the private universities to arrange necessary finances for them.

To be really developed economically, technologically, socially, politically and culturally Bangladesh needs near 100 percent literacy rate, and at the same time a relatively small number, say 5 percent of its adult population must be very highly educated (top level scientists, physicians with a combination of all specialisations, researchers in all disciplines, teachers, top level managers, political leaders, etc who will excel in their respective professions with innovative leadership. The latter group will work as the engine of sustainable growth and development of the country.

To produce such a group of skilled people, the government needs to institutionalise a system of formulating comprehensive national manpower plans projecting manpower needs of every sector for say for every 5-year period. This plan should include the projected number of highly specialised scientists, physicians, engineers, ICT experts, Ph.D.s, top level managers, mid-level personnel well trained in various vocations. On the basis of this manpower plan, a separate plan for promoting/ establishing the required number of public and private universities, research institutions and vocational training institutes must be implemented.

All this means that higher education must get its due priority. As the experiences of many countries with high literacy rate indicate, Bangladesh will remain stagnated at low trap of development if it continues to assign lower priority to higher education as was the case in the past.

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Whither education policy?

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AS the newly elected government begins work on formulating a new education policy, newspapers have been publishing serious articles and letters on the subject from home and abroad. Recently I came across three such write-ups. The Daily Star published an article by Dr. H R Khan, a graduate of Harvard School of Education, now teaching Russian to US forces. It is a research based paper where Khan cited statistics on the low achievement of primary school students on various learning objectives. Dr. Khan narrated the importance of the quality of learning achievement as follows: 1. "unable to read and write at the level as they are, children won't be able to learn more complex materials that build upon prior skills and will have to eventually drop out. Soon the country will lack a qualified and skilled and, more importantly, an educated citizenry."

Educated citizenry is needed for building a democratic society, less susceptible to accept extremism, better health conscious and more productive to enhance economic growth, Khan pointed out. For all these to happen in the 21st century, Bangladesh has to take a quantum leap in its education experience, Dr. Khan concluded. He hoped that the newly elected government has got an opportunity to step up improvement in primary education and make tremendous contributions to our nation. (revitalizing education was the theme of his paper). The lacuna in the primary education has been well documented by many others, CAMPE for one. The Daily Star also carried a headline on Feb 7, 2009: "70 pc can't read and write, even after 5-yr study." It also reported that 87% failed to do simple math calculation like addition and subtraction. There is no disagreement on the need to change the situation, as soon as possible, through adopting a broader policy at the

national level.

Mr. Abdul Khaleque, a retired IGP and secretary, published a long paper in The Independent (Vision of Change). He mentioned high drop-out at the primary level, too heavy a course load burdened with religious and foreign language studies, etc., and three parallel systems --- normal, madrasa and English --- dividing society into three distinct ways. And this when primary education provides the basis for further education and career. Most importantly, Khaleque gave a chart with 10 by 13 matrixes, grades of schools in the top row and subjects on the left side column. He suggested contact hours in each grade for different subjects; 20 hours at grade 1 and rising to 40 hours at grade 10 per week, primarily intended to change the madrasa system. The chart can be used to combine all the three lines of education up to grade 10 after discussions with the various interest groups under the banner of uniform educa-

tion. Mr. Khaleque is a very senior person with long standing interest in public policy. His suggestion to improve primary and secondary school education can be taken seriously by the new government.

The problems of higher education have also been studied by many individuals and organisations, including the University Grants Commission. The UGC prepared a 20-year visionary plan during the last regime. Reportedly the World Bank offered to finance a major portion of the improvement plan prepared by the UGC and the caretaker government. Money has already been placed with the government for that purpose and it was announced that the plan would be implemented by the newly elected government from January 2009. Eighty percent of the students enroll in colleges under the National University and the low quality of education in these colleges is widely known. Higher education is considered as basic education these days

since skills are required to be attained in English language, computer and analytical methods. Our students fall behind in these skills from pre-university levels in education. Hence such skills must be acquired at tertiary levels. In this respect the UN Declaration on Human Rights 1948 put higher education as a fundamental human right. In our case, those who pass HSC with grades above 2.5 out of 4 may be considered as meritorious and should have an opportunity to join programs in higher studies. There is a clear shortage of places for them in universities in the public and private sectors.

In the past, education policy was framed several times. The first instance was the Khuda Commission in 1975. The debate ultimately staggers on two vital issues. One issue is the medium of instruction and the other is the different streams that have developed over the years in both public and private

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