insights into what is happening to our big neighbour, India, in the university education sector. According to the participants at a conference held last June in Washington DC, it was appreciated that India's so-called "demographic dividend" of a younger population compared to developed countries is as much an opportunity as it is a challenge. A Wharton Business School feature on the issue says "the task of meeting global talent needs with an educated and trained workforce is too huge for any one nation to take on." Business leaders and government officials from US and India at the conference attempted to size up the challenge and find ways to deal with it.

The conference was organised by the US-India Business Council (USIBC). Recognising that 35 percent of the world's illiterate live in India (almost half of the world's illiterate are in South Asia of which 97 percent live in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh), the speakers at the conference drew a roadmap to get 30 percent of India's 240 million school children into higher education over the next decade, up from the current 12.4 percent. For this, India is planning to build new colleges and universities, both in the public and private sectors. India at present has 480 universities and 22,000 colleges. In the next 10 years, it will need 700 new universities and 35,000 new colleges. India has announced infrastructure build-outs worth more than US$ 1.5 trillion over the next five years. All this information comes from no less than Kapil Sibal, India's minister for human resource development, speaking as a key resource person at the conference.

As India has become the back office for many US multinationals and domestic corporations, US has extended its hand of collaboration to India to build up its higher education. Last fall, US government provided a US$ 300,000 grant to its Institute of International Education to create a two-year academic partnership programme between American universities and their counterparts in India and China.

Last October, US officials hosted 50 university leaders from India to discuss collaborations in education. While all these are taking place in our neighbour's house, how foolish is it of us to talk of closing down universities? No wonder, previously the Bangladeshi media carried ads of many third grade colleges and schools of other countries, excepting India. Now India has been added to the list. The more we shut down the more they open. As it has happened with our Adamjee Jute Mills, we closed one, India opened six new jute mills in the same year.

The new Private University Act-2010 took about seven years to formulate and though it is not totally foolproof, it is much more balanced than the one that was talked about. Any law will always have room for improvement. Implementing the law is much more challenging than framing it. Shooting the target with a gun needs competence rather than assembling the armament!

Amongst the 53 private universities operating in Bangladesh, the perpetrators are many. Some offer courses for which they are least qualified, having no qualified faculties, no labs and no libraries. Some have a student size three times larger than they can hold, turning classes into sweatshops. A particular "university" has three Vice-Chancellors, all claiming to be authentic! There is an allegation that at least one has outsourced a couple of its departments to a "conman" who runs it as his private grocery shop. One has taken such a grocery shop to the northern part of the country.

The class loads of teachers in quite a few private universities are extraordinarily high. I was amazed to learn that in some of these "universities", junior teachers are expected to teach five to six different courses, the pay is poor and the morale of faculty members is very low. They have to punch cards upon entering into the building and do not have any service rules, and the authorities forbid the use of university facilities for research. If the students do not turn up for a particular class, the teachers lose their payment. This is not how a university should be run.

The enacted law has enough ammo to clamp down on all these and other perpetrators. The UGC just needs to use them pragmatically and judiciously without threatening to close down any one of them, excepting the ones that have more than one person as a vice-chancellor or the ones that grossly violate the Act.

The oldest private university in the country is 18 years old and the youngest just five. All should not be weighed on the same scale for their compliances and normal activities like opening new departments or new admissions, and should not be affected on grounds such as not having a permanent campus. I still believe a permanent campus should not be one of the prime requisites for any seat of learning. Even the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and many such institutions of repute in Europe and US have some of their academic programmes run from rented premises.

The emphasis should be on whether learning and teaching is taking place properly. Even