HIGHER EDUCATION

Vying for quantity or quality?

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ACCORDING to the University Grants Commission (UGC), there are 31 public, 52 private and 2 international universities in Bangladesh and the total number of students in all these universities are more than 2 million. The unemployment rate in 2009 was 5.1 per cent when in 2008 it was 4.2 per cent -- it is the formal data but about 40% of the population is underemployed; many in the labour force work only a few hours a week, at low wages. In this situation, our government is thinking for setting up universities in every district. Academicians argue that the government's plan to establish public university in each district across the country is unrealistic.

Though there is a significant development in some aspects of education sector, still there are a lot of growing problems. And there is a rising dissatisfaction among both teachers and students regarding different facilities in the universities from the part of government. Again, with the rising trend of unemployment, the students of public universities are at stake in the competition with those of private universities.

The backbone of our public universities is on the verge of breaking for various reasons and our teachers, students, and guardians, above all our policy makers, are liable for it. Education is one of the few sectors which government cannot privatize fully rather providing a lot of money, they try to sustain it. But, when education becomes means of business, teachers hanker after money and politicians use the students as weapons, nation can hope nothing good from this sort of educated society.

This sector has plunged into a deep sea of problem; teacher quality, research facility, politicisation, lack of resources, prolonged course duration and a frustrating future are all responsible for this. Accommodation problem is very acute in many public universities and experts argue that it is the main reason for the students to be involved in politics. But, before ensuring these facilities, we are going to set a large number of universities by investing huge amount of money.

Would not it be wise to ensure quality education in the prevailing universities first and then go for extending the area? Where will

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the graduates go? Is there any estimation or supposed destination of those students in the hand of government?

Though there is a good effort from the education minister, this sector is facing problems in running the existing ones in terms of poor infrastructure, monetary crunch and lack of faculties. Academicians argue that against the backdrop of failure of the existing public universities to play their due role, the government's plan to set up more universities will not bring any good results for higher education.

In the world ranking our universities are gradually lagging behind. During the last two decades many departments, institutes and centers have been opened in some public universities without taking into cognisance their "utility" in the real world; financial burden imposed on the government exchequer in the process; their overlapping nature of programmes with older ones; and scarcity of resources in terms of space, facilities and personnel. Again, it is an open secret that in public universities often instead of actual teachers voters are recruited to buttress the strength of the ruling group in university-wide elections. Merit is sometimes set aside in the recruitment process and is sacrificed at the altar of expediency to suit the "reality."

Accountability system in the public universities has literally broken down. Some would say that it does not exist any more. In many cases chairmen of departments and directors of institutes are unable to persuade their senior and mid-ranking colleagues to take their assigned classes regularly though taking classes is the basic responsibility of a teacher. So either the course is reassigned to a relatively junior colleague or the senior and mid-ranking colleague finally agrees

to give a few lectures and then declaring that the course has been completed.

Also it is common knowledge that examinations are delayed because of a number of factors including non-submission of question papers in time and delay in checking examination scripts. If number of universities increases, these phenomena will be repeated indeed.

UGC has observed that public and private universities have largely failed to implement the aims and objectives of higher education (The Daily Star). The situation of our private universities is also very paradoxical. There are some universities where many people cannot afford to read and on the other side, there are some which are too poor performers. Observing their activities, any one can claim that these are business centres not education centres.

UGC assessments have identified, with the exception of a few, universities that do not have the facilities needed for quality teaching. The faculties do not have the necessary credentials, and student quality is also poor. The result has been a slide in quality. A large number of private universities
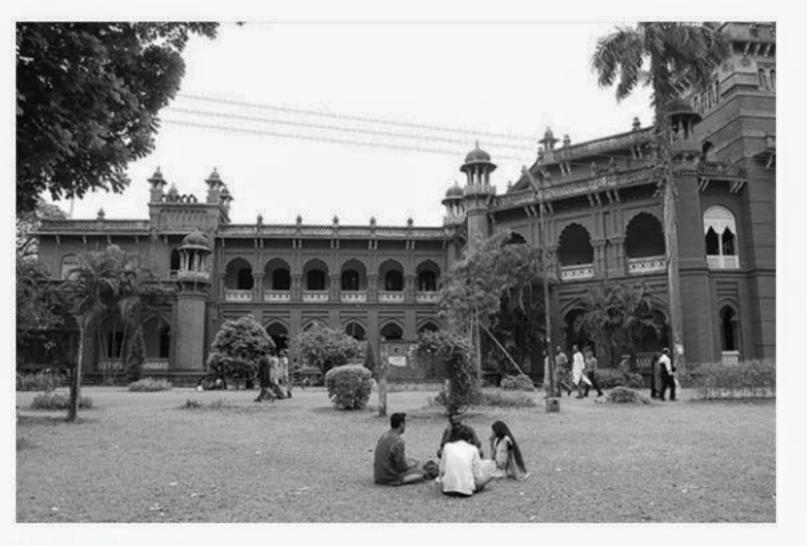
have failed to meet the minimum requirements of physical infrastructures, full time qualified faculty, libraries, teaching aids and other facilities that are essential for imparting quality education.

Out of total 84 public and private universities, seven public and 42 private universities are situated in the capital region, which shows regional discrimination. It is also an obstacle to spread of balanced education in all regions. So, there is an option to work with -- to shift some of these universities out of Dhaka, which would be beneficial for the students and for all, perhaps excluding the teachers because many teachers are unwilling to leave this business area for both altruistic and personal reasons.

So, it should now be clear that there may be many positive agenda for establishing universities in every district considering the growing demand of the population and for dissemination of knowledge among the entire population, but before going for it should not we look deep into the prevailing situation in the public universities in the country? The investment government needs to make for those establishments is more than sufficient to give infrastructural support and other facilities to the prevailing universities to be efficient. At the same time, private universities should be under some regulations so that less cost and better education can be ensured and then it would be wise to think about setting up more universities in different regions.

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Future of knowledge

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IN the history of epistemology, the invention of printing press was an era-defining event. It enabled people to exchange knowledge across the globe. When people were in need of a great synthesiser of knowledge, the idea of an encyclopedia came into existence. The notion of encyclopedia has been revolutionarily popularised by Wikipedia. Today, it is one of the primary sources of knowledge for many of us. What Google is doing is even more revolutionary. If you wonder about Google's power, write your name in Google search engine and hit the Enter. See what happens! You may be surprised to see that your best friend has written on her blog about what you did at thirty first night. If you are a researcher, forget about going to libraries and taking notes for hours. The Internet has stored all knowledge for you. And this giant store is just a mouse-click away from you.

You may ask me: what's wrong if Google hoards knowledge for people? Well, having an access to knowledge is no longer a big deal. What matters is how we use the knowledge. I heard from my science professor that a person can learn to make an atomic bomb from various websites retrievable by Google search. If this is true, then the future of knowledge can be quite contrary to our expectations. In our unpredictable future, an easy access to knowledge may also pose a destructive threat to human societies.

Let me come to my main question: what is worth knowing? There is no cookie-cutter answer to this question. I have witnessed fierce debates on this topic in academy. Traditionally, four disciplines -- science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) -- have claimed to generate knowledge that is more important for our world. Metaphysics and the human sciences, on the other hand, have argued that they create and disseminate knowledge that is essential to the existence of the human race. Being sandwiched by these opposing arguments, I contend that instead of judging the superiority of knowledge, we should focus on its appropriate uses. I further argue that it is more important to know how to ethically and respectfully use knowledge than to constantly generate new knowledge. If we invest all our time and energy in creating new knowledge and thus fail to teach people to use it appropriately, we may end up destroying ourselves.

One of the defining characteristics of humans is their group feeling. An inability to respect people who belong

to other groups is the root cause of terrorism, human rights violations, and wars across the globe. However, we cannot afford to avoid interaction with people who belong to different ideological, political, and ethnic groups. We will likely interact more frequently with diverse groups in the future than we do at present. In this situation, our knowledge of inter-group understanding and respect for diversity will play very important roles.

There is no doubt that the human sciences are very vital for fostering inter-group understanding and mutual respect. Generating only the STEM knowledge without fostering ethical behaviour and respect for others is comparable to providing nuclear weapons to a terrorist group. It seems to me that scientists and scholars are engaged in an endless and fierce competition of creating new knowledge, but they are not investing their full capacity to teach people to appropriately use the existing knowledge. I do not mean that we should cease to investigate and explore the unknown. What I call for is that if

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we want to peacefully exist in the future, we need to teach people (1) what is worth knowing, and (2) how to appropriately use what we know.

The hegemonic nature of the STEM knowledge always creates new demands. For example, today's citizens are expected to have some mastery of technology; otherwise, they cannot have an access to information and various services. However, an excessive focus on the STEM may have a negative effect on the quality of civic life. The STEM disciplines must be credited for the advancement of the world. However, metaphysics and the human sciences deserve more attention than they receive at present.

Our life contains many enduring puzzles that we cannot quantify. Therefore, a more comprehensive focus on the human sciences and an integration of human values into the study of STEM disciplines are necessary to teach our future generations to ethically and respectfully use their knowledge. It is important that we add a component of ethical and respectful application of knowledge to our epistemological practices. In all our processes of knowledge creation, we need to teach people how to respect others regardless of their social, ideological, and political differences.

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Civil society and government: Partnership potentiality

ADVOCATE SALMA ALI

THE Daily Star deserves praise for bringing up issues of social and environmental concern in our country. The news published on saving Gulshan-Banani Lake recently in The Daily Star came to my notice. I would also like to thank Mr. Omar Sadat, SC Lawyer who has filed the petition. This is notable here that without participation of Civil Society in a large scale, result for public interest litigations can't be achieved in the long run.

While the whole world is moving towards sustainable development following environmental symmetry, we are still lagging behind in that. The indiscriminate industrialisation process in Bangladesh over the past decades has created significant environmental problems. Dwellers of the urban areas are the worst sufferers. Dhaka, a city of millions, has become one of the world's top polluted cities. Environmental concern is a serious issue for the city dwellers. The environment of the city is affected by several factors including unplanned urbanization and development, lack of implementation of laws and policies, lack of co-ordination amongst the service-providing agencies, ambiguous institutional arrangements and so on.

The laws on urban planning and protection cover most of the environmental issues but in reality these laws are hardly enforced. The long term practice of poor enforcement of laws encourages bad practices that hinder a planned urban growth in the country. Article 111and 112 of Bangladesh Constitution declare the binding effect of SC judgements upon all authority of the Republic and we should comply with it accordingly. The respondents of HC directives on saving Gulshan-Banani Lake should imply the directives immediately after the orders considering the urgency of the issue.

But this is also true that there are examples where after HC verdict came up with guidelines on certain issue some of civil society organisations came forward and circulated the order to the relevant stakeholders for sensitisation and implementation of the guidelines. As I was actively involved to take such initiative my experience says such initiatives are proven to be effective in dealing with certain concerned issues. In reference to this I would like to suggest Gulshan and Banani society should also come forth spontaneously and take initiative for sensitising the issue of environmentally critical situation of Gulshan-Banani Lake to the relevant stake-

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holders and help in implementation of the regulations.

There is another thing to be noted here regarding poor condition of different parks in the city and I would like to request the conscious civil society members to take initiative deliberately to protect these parks considering the physical and social implications of these areas. The parks in Gulshan, Banan, Baridhara, Ramna and other places in the city have been created for beautification as well as maintaining a healthy environment but now these places are considered critically threatened and are reported to be place of public nuisance. As a member of Baridhara society I would also like to request Baridhara society to take initiatives for ensur-

ing security and social environment in the lake and park area. It is always appreciative if we do not rely on government all the time for ensuring security and social environment within our localities. Many of our small and combined efforts for solving problems would help easing burden on government and give strength to partnership for work.

We must accept here that as a government of developing country it has limitations in implementing policies and laws. Unhindered influx of poor people in to the city is a big challenge for urban management. In this situation Civil Society members should come forth and co-operate with government in some way for implementing policies

and laws. If we look around there are some successful examples in our country where Civil Society members initiated co-operation with government to deal with certain urban problems and the result of such co-operation has been really remarkable.

There can be seen an increasing trend among young women and children to come to the cities aiming to pursue a better life and livelihood. These young women and children are living in an unhealthy condition and become vulnerable to various factors and their social protection cannot be ensured although there are some provisions in our labor laws and social welfare laws. In some cases they are forced to involve themselves in many forms of illegal and anti-social activities. Perpetrators use park and other public recreation places for such activities.

These young women and children are also vulnerable to forced trafficking as it is also reported that cases of internal trafficking are increasing alarmingly now a days. This is to be noted here that the Suppression of Immoral Trafficking Act, 1933 has provision to prevent public nuisance in park areas and also to prevent suppression against young women and children, and DMP is supposedly playing its role according to

DMP Act but the situation remains still a matter of concern because of poor implementation of the laws. Section 74 and 75 of DMP Act clearly states that performing any anti-social activities in public places is a punishable offence.

The practice of working as partners by civil society and government in urban areas would help improve the state of urban management to some remarkable extent. In this case considering the fact of humanity and vulnerability of those young women and children, government with the help civil society should take initiative to rescue them from such deleterious conditions and also take initiative for their rehabilitation and sustainable reintegration. Affluent members and professional experts in our society should extend hand of co-operation spontaneously in this regard for giving professional, institutional and financial support, where necessary, toward providing alternative livelihood option and sustainable integration. As a member of conscious society I am ready to extend my hand. Let's start working together for the society from now on.

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