



Private universities now

MASUM BILLAH

THE birth of private universities in Bangladesh has passed more than two decades. Now their existence is a visual reality with significantly successful stories in most of the cases and in comparison of performance with public universities. Now private universities are not a substitute for the public ones rather they stand by their own credentials. At the initial stage students opted for private universities in case of their failure to get enrolled in public universities, but things have changed now proving the growing significance and standard of private universities. Our private universities are saving 100 thousand crore taka in terms of foreign exchange which

is nearly 60 percent of our annual budget. 100 percent 'O' and 'A' level students don't go abroad, 63 percent stay in the country and 40 percent get enrolled in private universities.

Private universities are blamed for not doing adequate research work as is mandatory for a university. A recent report says that most private universities are reluctant to do research which appears to be a major hurdle facing students in acquiring proper learning. Eleven private universities did not spend a single penny on research projects in the year 2011. Things have not changed so far. According to the Private University Act 2010, institutions are bound to spend a major portion of their budget for carrying out research work. UGC says, "The commission hopes that for the sake of improving the quality of higher educa-

tion and national development, private universities will carry out research work. We still surely pressurize the rest of the institutions to do so." The report says, "The rest of the 41 universities spent a total of Tk 91,52,684 for carrying out research work in 2011. On average universities spent Tk 63, 20, 797 in 2011." BRAC university spent Tk 14,23,04,907 for research and it is the highest amount for conducting research work in 2011.

Government of Bangladesh has already given approval to 56 private universities of Bangladesh under the Non-Government Universities Act-1992 and Revised Non-Government Universities Act-1998. At present 52 private universities are operating with more than 1 lac 90 thousand students. In the mean time, the government imposed ban on four universities a few years ago.

The government took various measures since 2004 to make the present Act in force, as void. In 2008 the then caretaker government promulgated the Non-Government Universities Ordinance 2008. According to the Acts of 1992 & 1998, Board of Trustees, Regency Council, Board of Governors were working together. But two different authorities have been created under this Act. One is the Syndicate and the other is the Board of Trustees, which tend to create administrative conflict. In Section 20, it has been stated that a private university must have a syndicate of its own. But the vice chancellor has been proposed as the head of syndicate. In the Act of 1992 & 1998 the syndicate



Students in a group study at a private university

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Violent politics bad for education

Political parties talk about good education, quality education, and they advise students to become good citizens in their speeches in any programs they attend. Yet, time and again they forget that... calling strikes or stopping normal public lives do not promote good education.

JAMILUR REZA CHOUDHURY

OVER the last few years number of private universities as well as the number of students enrolled in these universities have increased significantly. Most public universities face disruptions in the academic calendar due to unscheduled closure resulting from political agitations, some of which lead to violence with use of firearms. As a consequence, academic activities are seriously disrupted, leading to session jams. However, in comparison most private universities have not faced such problems yet. The relatively better performing private universities have been striving over the years to maintain the academic calendar in spite of disruptions due to hartals, transport strikes and non-cooperation movements.

Usually extra classes are held at the earliest opportunity to make up the classes which could not be held as per schedule. For example, if there is a one-day hartal, classes are held on the following Saturday, which, for most universities is a weekly holiday. Similarly, if hartals are observed on two days in a particular week, make up classes are held on the following Friday and Saturday. However, with the increase in frequency as well as duration of these disruptions, it is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain the schedule. The students as well as the teachers have to face a lot of uncertainties and mental stress in trying to cope with these disruptions.

The current political situation in Bangladesh has adversely affected the academic environment in almost all universities—both public and private. As members of the academia in Bangladesh we are concerned about the future of our education. Strikes are being called by different political parties amidst



Students during recess at a private university campus

the Secondary and Higher Secondary examinations. When the political parties talk about the progress and the prosperity of our nation, they seem to forget their commitment towards this land when it comes to calling of hartals or other programs that obstruct normal lifestyle and movement of the public. Students are most affected because they are among the most vulnerable groups affected by the hartals.

During hartals, guardians are worried about the safety of their children or wards; they do not send their children or wards to schools, colleges or universities. Even if the educational institutes in urban areas decide to keep it open, classes taken are not effective due to the small number of students participating in the classes. On the other hand the authorities of these institutions are in no position to declare the schools closed or cannot force the students to attend classes during hartals. The violent nature of the activities that the protesters carry on to make their hartals successful costs lives as we have seen in the recent past. No one wants to expose himself to the inherent risk and become a victim

of these casualties.

In the recent past, picture of students getting severely injured after explosion have made us disturbed in the same manner as it did to the mass people. In fact, being academicians, this news touches our heart more than others and makes us more anxious about our students.

Apart from this security issue, rescheduling of classes become additional hassle of these institutions running on semester system have to make sure that semesters are completed as scheduled. Otherwise the whole system would be pushed back for the students who will suffer for not being able to graduate on time. It is a big blow for a country like us where we have started to see the early morning light of better educational standard and academic practices.

Policy makers surely can take meaningful steps to stop these violent acts. The common people want to live their regular lives peacefully. Political parties can come to an agreement that none will stage programs that puts the lives of the common people at risk. All political parties talk about good

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Governance of private universities

For the smooth functioning of the private universities, all the stakeholders including the government, the UGC, and other administrative bodies, teachers, and students have their respective role to play.

DR. M. EMDADUL HAQ

ESTABLISHING higher level educational institutions in the private sector is a daunting task, but implementing effective governance in those institutions is even more challenging, for it takes a long time, a visionary mind, serious commitments, consistency, concerted efforts and finally enormous sacrifices. Indeed, nowhere in the world can trust and credibility of an institution be achieved overnight.

The idea of establishing a private university in Bangladesh came about as a result of a growing number of students seeking a higher education, a need for which public universities were insufficient. Following independence in 1971, there were only four public universities and the government was not in a position to mobilise funds to establish and run an adequate number of universities with required enrolment capacities. By mid-1980s, the number gradually rose to seven, but in the subsequent decades it shot up to nearly 90. Of these figures, 31 are government funded autonomous entities and the rest belong to the private sector.

Over a period of time there has been a paradigm shift across the

globe, with a tilt toward privatisation and market-driven education policies. Some visionary philanthropic business leaders, at that point of time, came forward with the concept of establishing private universities with qualified, proven and competent academic leaders and generated resources from their own funds. They took a considerable amount of risks in establishing private universities. During this critical juncture, few people could believe that the private sector would be able to provide quality higher education.

Nevertheless, the government realised that without establishing private universities, the demand for higher education could not be met. Accordingly, under the Private University Act 1992, the dreams of the private entrepreneurs were partly fulfilled. By mid 1990s, the North South University (NSU) graduates entered the job market and received employment opportunities at the multi-national companies and corporate business houses. This success indicated that the education imparted by the first private university was as good as, if not better than, that of established public universities. Of late, the government has enforced the Private Universities Act 2010 to bring about discipline in the private sector

higher education.

Currently, there are about 60 private universities running in the country; NSU being the pioneering model that had started functioning in 1993. Taking advantage of the marketability and population concentration, almost 85% of the private universities established their campus in Dhaka city alone. This percentage is progressively reduced in the case of Chittagong and Sylhet, without having any private university established in Barisal and Rangpur divisions.

Nevertheless, there are momentous differences among the private universities in terms of governance status, quality of education provided, performance of the administrative bodies, infrastructure facilities, quality of students' enrolment, including faculty recruitment policies and access to resources. In a survey the University Grants Commission of Bangladesh (UGC) in 2011 categorised only 10 private universities to be in the 'A' category, and a few of them being comparable to similar universities anywhere in the world. A large number of other universities, however, were placed in the 'poorly' performing list in the variables, and were considered as 'diploma mills' rather than full-fledged universities.

One comparative advantage with the private universities, however, is that these institutions are officially politics-free and supposed to function purely as academic institutions, and faculty and students by and large are not activists of mainstream political parties. It helps to maintain the academic calendar without having any session jams as compared to the public universities. There is no major political violence or troubles prevalent at the university campus, either. Overall, the emergence of the private universities has created a competitive environment for the public universities and in this race the former is increasingly becoming



A class in progress at a private university

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