

Present scenario of private universities

University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB)

Private universities contribute substantially to the higher education sector in Bangladesh. They offer an educational opportunity to qualified students who cannot find seats in the public universities, and who otherwise would go abroad.

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THE role of a university is to provide quality education in an environment that is safe, proficient, and intellectually stimulating. This environment should be conducive to learning, teaching, and research, and benefit the students as well as the faculty members. University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB) prides itself on being a well-run and organized institution with a low rate of class rescheduling. However, the present situation of disruptions has presented a challenge to the university, testing the flexibility and patience of our community.

The ULAB authorities have made it clear, above all, that the integrity of the courses and the programmes must be maintained. This means we will reduce neither the length nor the content of any course. During disruptions, it is not safe for students or faculty members to travel across the city, so classes must be rescheduled on the days we have normally reserved for meetings, seminars, and graduate classes: Thursdays,

Saturdays, and even Fridays.

For the convenience of everyone, we try to maintain the exact same class routine, only shifted by day. However, when disruptions have been compounded by national holidays, it has left us with no extra days in hand, and forced us to find creative solutions and timings.

In order to maintain the integrity of the courses, however, something must be sacrificed. Departmental meetings are truncated or run at half-staff as the faculty members excuse themselves to take class. Seminars and workshops are postponed or cancelled. Club activities are hampered. And student showcases at the National Museum, Goethe Institute, Shilpakala, and Chhayanot have had to be rescheduled.

Faculty office hours are shortened, making it difficult to advise students properly. Their research is also hindered, as many faculty members find their opportunities to conduct research, both online and in the field, greatly reduced.

ULAB believes in the principles of liberal arts and active learning. These principles mean that we deliver a wide

range of co-curricular activities. We have several career skills workshops which train our students in the soft skills needed to successfully get jobs. Our Social Welfare Club and Student Affairs Office run health programs. As many of our students do not have high-speed internet at home, the computer labs and on-campus Wi-Fi are essential to their work.

One example of the complexity of the problem: Each year, ULAB hosts the Fair Play Cup Inter-Private University Cricket Tournament on its own playground. Eight to ten private universities participate in this tournament, coming from North South University, BRAC University, East West University, Northern University, State University of Bangladesh, Stamford University, Manarat International University, and United International University. This year, our tournament was held from March 18th to 28th – right in the middle of a series of political disruptions. The inauguration itself was on a designated hartal day, and the chief guest was former captain of the Bangladesh National Cricket Team Mr. A.S.M. Roquibul Hassan. After discussion

with all the participants, it was decided that we would go forward with the tournament, no matter what, considering the number of universities involved. With their permission, the tournament was held successfully.

It is another challenge to keep all students and faculty notified, even on short notice. We reach out through phone, email, class representatives, and our web portal. As most ULAB students use social media, we employ our Facebook page and Twitter account to communicate as well. Faculty members have sent readings and received homework assignments online. But the rapidly changing situation can make it difficult for all involved and sorely test the patience of our students. In order to minimize disruption, ULAB is actively exploring how to put entire courses online.

It is our view that the flexibility and dynamism of private universities have in fact allowed them to weather the current situation. The main quality of private universities is their ability to innovate. Unencumbered by a rigid bureaucracy, they are able to identify needs and employ modern technologies to find solutions. Students they produce have internalized these values, and as a result are themselves dynamic and innovative, bringing these qualities into the job force.



Class on film making in progress at a private university.

Private universities contribute substantially to the higher education sector in Bangladesh. They offer an educational opportunity to qualified students who cannot find seats in the public universities, and who otherwise would go abroad. They successfully provide a safe and smooth study environment, which many students and their guardians recognize and appreciate. The present situation is endangering this mission, jeopardiz-

ing the educational careers of over one lakh students.

Universities are for the ages. They will go forward, dig deep and weather the storms. But for the students caught in the interim, the lessons of politics and society they are learning may not be worth the cost.

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Academic probation of private university students

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can pass an examination with 33% score only.

Naturally, the liberties with which the examination scripts are checked in these institutions with varying grading schemes also tend to differ. Hence students with weak academic backgrounds may abruptly find it very difficult to achieve a passing grade once he or she is enrolled in a private university program, and the difficult grading scheme may result to a student falling into academic probation.

Involvement with other activities: As non-academic commitments increase, it would be expected that time available for academic work and subsequent academic success would decrease. The courses offered in private universities in Bangladesh are highly intensive in nature. In a three-month long semester period a student has to undertake three to four courses, regardless of the subject, all of which completes ten or

more chapters and examines the students regularly with in-class quizzes, sit-in examinations, class and home assignments, case studies, project work and presentations, comprising both individual and team effort. Such high volume and intensity of academic courses demands the student to allocate an adequate time of the day for preparing for the classes leaving limited room for involvement with other activities, whether they be extra-curricular activities in nature or be personal or for family and friends. Involvement with activities or "too much social life" other than studies are thus expected to adversely affect a student's preparation for academic exercises because it leaves less time to be devoted to studying. Such involvements are deemed to influence a student's falling into academic probation.

Wrong course selection: Series of course selection decisions may directly



Library of a private university

influence students' future by widening or delimiting further study and future educational and occupational possibilities. Students make their course selections in response to a powerful set of incentives: grades. Improper course selection or poor advice

may put a student in a difficult situation, for which student is not mentally equipped, may result in poor academic performances. The major study discipline may be chosen either by the student on his or her personal motivation or be influenced by family members, friends, or faculties. If personal motivation, interest and objectives are unmatched with those of the friend, family or faculty, then there is a chance that a wrong choice is made regarding the course selection. In addition, personal choices may also be incorrect where a student fails to appropriately recognize and appreciate his or her true strengths, skills and advantages regarding various study disciplines. In some cases, failure is directly related to students' inability to grasp the material being presented or their lack of interest in particular courses. Subsequently, choosing a course that does not fit an individual's strengths, skills and techniques may cause a student to perform poorly in a wrongly fitted class, and pave the way for falling into academic probation.

Lack of seriousness in studies: Seriousness in studies is vitally important regardless of the study volume and intensity. Even relatively simple concepts are expected to become difficult for a student who does not pay attention class lecture and review the materials later. A student may not have chosen an area of academic discipline or course carefully. It puts students into a position from where he/she struggles to perform properly.

Family problem: In recent decades, Bangladeshi families have been experiencing significant stress and functional discourse as unparalleled changes in family structures are taking place. Traditional family environment where security, caring, and nurturing were abundance has been

broken down. It is an impediment to perform well in academic course. Family problems may cause a student to lose concentration on studies, and may constraint a person's motivation and determination. Severe family problems such as illness or death of a family member or a break-up between the family members is also expected to contribute to a more significant adverse effect than a less severe family problem such as quarrel or disagreements between the family members. Regardless of the degree of intensity of family problems it is expected that these family problems may act as a constraint towards a student's concentration and motivation in studying, leading to poor academic performance and eventually falling into academic probation.

Personal problem: A personal problem of an individual, whether that be physical or mental is expected to adversely affect a person's academic performance. A physical personal problem such as an injury or illness may directly prevent a student from attending classes, participating in team activities or preparing examinations. A mental personal problem, on the other hand, may affect a student's concentration and motivation for studying. The latter is deemed to have a similar effect as a family problem can cause.

Concluding thoughts
Students on probation need immediate and effective ways to turn around their academic lives. Using self-assessment and intervention procedures, a study skills portfolio strategy teaches students how to appeal probationary status and reinstate full academic standing. The following ways might help the students to come out of academic probation.

Academic institutions' perspective: Some researchers suggest that influences of grades are not beyond the influence of institutional intervention. They identified

three types of interventions that have positive influences on students' GPAs. These interventions include instruction in academic skills, advising and counseling programs, and comprehensive support programs. With regard to advising and counseling, the literature supports intrusive developmental advising as a significant way to promote and support student persistence and success.

Intrusive advising is a psychosocial dimension which is described as having more personal than professional approach. Through an intrusive relationship, an advisor personally can reach out to students, meets with them, help them identify the issues and situations contributing to their academic difficulty, assist in setting short and long term goals, and guide them through the development plan to accomplish their goals which includes advisor-student follow-up. It incorporates intervention strate-

gies that allow the adviser to become an active part of the student's life, which, in turn, helps the student to stay motivated.

Students' perspective: Students enter higher education with a variety of backgrounds and educational experiences. A student can have high self-efficacy (student controls the outcomes of their actions/decisions), which can support his/her academic achievements or can have low self-efficacy which can be detrimental to their success.

The students are required to manage and balance multiple parts of life, including the life inside and outside of the classroom. Sometimes the life outside of the classroom begins to gain ground over the studies and the student faces great challenges. In many cases, the students may be dealing with multiple non-academic issues (such as mental health, family problems, financial struggles, and work demands) which

may become blur and intertwined.

The transition into the institution can also affect students' academic success especially during their first semester. Student retention literature is clear that the first six weeks of a student's first semester on campus is most critical, particularly with regard to transition. This transition can be difficult for students no matter if they are first year or seasoned students transferring to the new academic institution. The freshmen do not necessarily know how to look at themselves as learners, to think about how they learn, to set goals, to actively apply strategies and to monitor themselves as they advance toward a goal.

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