

Can for-profit universities assure academic excellence?

HAFIZ G. A. SIDDIQI

THE number of profit-making private universities is increasing globally. Is this because for-profit universities invariably generate the highest academic excellence, impart best quality education and create professional leaders? One might expect the answer to be yes since it is widely assumed that privatisation promotes professionalism that leads to operational efficiency. However, I would argue that the answer is a qualified NO.

All the best universities of the world are not-for-profit. This implies that for-profit universities do not necessarily guarantee quality assurance. Two significant factors account for the rise of for-profit higher educational institutions. The first is the inability of the state to meet the investment needs necessary to cope with the increasing demand for higher education. Second, not-for-profit private universities usually lack adequate endowments.

Together with globalisation, these two factors have triggered the rapid rise of for-profit universities. Ever since General Agreement on Trade and Services (GATS) declared higher education a tradable commodity, private entrepreneurs have found new profit-making opportunities by establishing private universities. Most private universities in the world are not-for-profit, although many countries have for-profit universities.

A university is for-profit if it is designed to generate surplus income after meeting all its capital and operating expenditures including taxes and interests, and allowed to take out part or whole of that surplus and distribute the same among the individual shareholders or members of the Board of Trustees as dividends. In contrast, a non-profit university is mandated to plough back any surplus toward university development only. It is the distribution of surplus that makes the difference; the surplus is reserved for institutional rather than individual benefits.

It is not profit-making as such that is the problem. To ensure high academic excellence, at least two conditions must be met -- recruitment of world class scholars and attracting the best young minds (students). Complications arise



BAYAZID AKTER/ DRIK NEWS

The role of owners /founders is the most important determinant of academic excellence or the quality of the graduates the university will produce, not necessarily profit.

when higher education is considered a private good because the temptation to increase private benefit (profit) at the expense of the quality of education is always present. If that happens, that is, if temptation prevails over ideology, it is likely to lower academic excellence.

Experience indicates that when sponsors believe that they have proprietary rights on an institution of higher learning, they treat academics as they would employees in any other business organisation. Often, non-academic considerations prevail over academic rationale. This kind of management style discourages high profile scholars from seeking employment in such institutions, thereby scholarly activities and academic excellence.

University professors are scholars, first and foremost. They are in their profession to create knowledge -- which is different from creating products or services, provided by the banking system, for example. It is true that teachers are also employees of the university, but they require a degree of flexibility and freedom to be innovative and creative. They do not welcome undue interference by the Board of Trustees or others in strictly academic matters such as admissions or recruitment. Nor do they

want any interference in university administration. Professors want to see faculty governance in place and so resist any kind of irregularity. Such ideal conditions hardly prevail in most for-profit universities.

Arguably, it is more likely that on revenue consideration a for-profit university would tend to admit more poor quality students and hire more low paid/part time poor quality teachers. Thus, the quality assurance question may be ignored. However, there may be exceptions. Some university founders may charge high tuition and other fees without compromising quality, with a view to maintaining high standards and high profits. This kind of university can attract international students and high profile professors. This situation will however depend on how successfully the university targets the appropriate market segment. A good example could possibly be Abu Dhabi Campus of New York University.

The operation of for-profit universities is not allowed in Bangladesh (see Private University Act 2010). Let me refer to the not-for-profit private universities operating in Bangladesh. Of the 71 private universities, only around 10 produce acceptable quality graduates. The

latter are hired by the higher segment of the local market consisting mostly of private universities, banks, multinationals, NGOs, etc. Graduates produced by other universities are also hired by local business and non-business organisations but at a lower market segment. Low quality universities survive because some employers agree to hire their graduates because they (low quality universities) find the graduates' skill appropriate for the level the employers operate at.

So employers' needs are related to the quality of education and skill a university provides. Private universities in the country have rarely produced world class scholars, executives, professionals or scientists who stand out globally as leaders in the respective professions, without their gaining further education /training at a more recognised university abroad. Unless universities produce graduates employable internationally, Bangladesh will not have world class universities.

It must be recognised that it is essential for every university to generate surplus for its survival, expansion and development. A clearly defined long run strategic plan must be kept in mind while ascertaining the amount of surplus needed to implement such plans. This exercise needs to be done keeping in mind the market segment the university wants to serve. Students' interest must not be ignored.

It is difficult to say whether a for-profit or not-for-profit university will invariably achieve the highest academic excellence. Academic excellence/quality of education can be taken at its highest level by either for-profit or not-for-profit universities if the founders forego personal greed, and effectively discourage corruption by ensuring the best management practices and good governance. The founders must be committed to serve the society. This implies that the role of owners /founders is the most important determinant of academic excellence or the quality of the graduates the university will produce, it is not necessarily profit. The vision, mission, commitment, determination and efforts of the founders are fundamental to the level of academic excellence.

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The culture of change

SHIFTING IMAGES



MILIA ALI

LAST week, while I was engaged in a casual conversation with my friend Wendy over a latte, she informed me that her son Ben, a budding violinist, had been selected by his school to participate in a music concert in Vienna. Before I could congratulate her, Wendy began to complain that Ben had refused to play his violin in the Mall to help raise money for financing his trip. As is common in the US, parents are required to contribute to these school trips and Wendy

asked Ben to help out by performing at the Mall. But, Ben, being an introverted teen-ager, rejected her proposal outright, which frustrated Wendy.

I must confess that I was a bit surprised at Wendy's expectation that a 14-year-old should pay for his concert tour. To me, this attitude appeared to be, in essence, very "American." As a South Asian mother, if my son were selected to participate in a prestigious musical event, I probably would have scraped the bottom of my savings to fund his excursion! I do appreciate that teaching children the value of money is part of a good upbringing. But, if my child "earned" a place in a music concert I would definitely help him develop his confidence through the exposure. For me that, too, is an important part of a child's upbringing.

However, Wendy's comment set me thinking on an issue that I have been grappling with for some time. She and I are both immigrants -- she is originally from China and I am Bangladeshi. What is puzzling is that, although both of us have lived in the United States for the same period of time, my friend seems to have adopted the attitudes and values of this country at a faster pace. I am still caught up in the time warp of Bangladeshi traditions. I wonder why?

I believe that retaining our inherited culture and imbibing the practices of our adopted country are not mutually exclusive. In fact, there are some basic areas where the core values of all races are the same. Perhaps we can make a more consolidated effort to accept these points of convergence.

I must clarify that this column is not about whether the cultural values of the American society are good or bad. It's a candid discussion on why some races blend more easily with the behavioural norms of their adopted country. For instance, Wendy had no qualms about changing her Chinese name to one that is less taxing on the western tongue. I often find my South Asian friends complaining about their colleagues at work struggling with "Ejazuddin" or "Subramanyam." But the idea of becoming Eddie or Sam seems to militate against their basic identity!

In general, most first generation immigrants have difficulty adapting to their changed environment. However, I have observed that South Asians are more resistant to change than other ethnic races. Surprisingly, they seem to do fine in their professional setting, where they quickly adopt the work ethic. But when it comes to personal and social norms they are relatively slow in embracing new diets, dress codes and customs, and seldom miss an opportunity to seek out a *dosa* or *kabab* place wherever it may be!

So, why are immigrants from the Indian sub-continent relatively more protective about their traditional practices and food habits? Is it because we are proud of our ancient civilisation and our identity is inextricably tied to our cultural heritage? It's true that we are more anchored to our cultural traditions than many other races and are, therefore, reluctant to cut the umbilical cord. But where do we draw the line as immigrants? How much do we retain and to what extent do we "acculturate"? More importantly, is it fair to thrust our way of life on those around us with an "in-your-face" attitude? For example, is it necessary to go to a restaurant and make a public spectacle about *halal* meat or the non-vegetarian content of the food? If we have taken the plunge to migrate to a new country we need to be sensitive to the ways of the majority. Even if we don't accept them we can be discreet about our discontent.

Many believe that the United States today is a mosaic, where multiple cultures are juxtaposed with the modern American culture, thus allowing each ethnic group to retain its unique qualities. However, no matter how much we immigrants try to preserve our identity, at some level there may be a need to integrate for the sake of greater social harmony. Also, if we isolate ourselves we run the risk of missing out on the rich eclectic influences of a country where so many diverse mores and traditions have converged.

As a first generation migrant to the United States, I believe that retaining our inherited culture and imbibing the practices of our adopted country are not mutually exclusive. In fact, there are some basic areas where the core values of all races are the same. Perhaps we can make a more consolidated effort to accept these points of convergence.

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The psalm before the storm

HUMOROUSLY YOURS



NAVEED MAHBUB

EID Mubarak. Belated Eid Mubarak. Advanced Eid Mubarak. Depends on when Eid is celebrated.

"What's your gut feeling on the exact day of Eid?"

"I don't know. Till Eid, my gut is totally empty. The only feeling in my gut is 'choi-oi-oi...'"

So, when exactly is Eid? At least we know for sure it's the day when all TV channels stop their regular programmes and start non-stop special programmes for five days.

There are a few enclaves in Bangladesh which celebrate Eid on a different day. Great help for the Bureau of Statistics to easily determine which parts of Bangladesh provide the largest contingent of wage earners to Saudi Arabia.

So, Eid is on Saudi time, Bangladesh time or local time.

Eid Day is over and you didn't have enough fun? No problem -- just go two

hours away. Controversy? Not in the least! Not knowing till the last minute as to when Eid is taking place is what makes it all the more exciting. Despite all the extravaganzas and glitz, how boring is it to know that Christmas will never take place on December 24.

Everybody heads home. Dhaka city is empty (except for the billboards). There is the temptation to do what the Chinese did 2200 years ago -- when all the people went to their villages to celebrate the Chinese new year, they quickly built the Great Wall.

This is when Dhaka beats Melbourne as the best city to live in. Stray cows and goats run to the roads for a breath of fresh air. Not being used to such clean air, my wife gets an asthma attack. I show up at the Eid party at warp speed -- only to find the host still yawning and brushing his teeth.

Oh, the joys of visiting the houses of friends and relatives. A new dimension to these visits, "What's your Wi-Fi password?"

The excitement builds up over a month of sacrifice. We experience the agony of hunger and the gratification of

restraint. As we patiently wait for dusk, we cease to say: "There just aren't enough hours in the day."

The rewards are in abundance even at the end of each day during the Holy Month. Food stalls turn foot paths into food paths. We are on a heavy diet, eating only heavy food.

And yet, there is a price to pay. There is a spike in drone attacks. After *iftar*, when you just want to unwind, there starts the droning: "Let's go shopping! Let's go shopping!"

Prices of onion are up. The only way to buy onion is with your provident fund. Perhaps they're being hoarded to be used as tear gas during the post Eid agitations.

And thus, the chaos in people's plans while going home and returning to work. The uncertainty of what's in store after Eid. But all WILL return to Dhaka no sooner than the last hour of the last day of Eid ul Adha.

But for now, let us enjoy the three days of bliss and tolerance -- they may just be the psalm before the storm...

The writer is an engineer & CEO turned comedian (by choice) and the host of NTV's Grameenphone Presents The Naveed Mahbub Show.

QUOTABLE Quotes

"People demand freedom of speech as a compensation for the freedom of thought which they never use."

Soren Aabye Kierkegaard

ACROSS

- Second-hand
- Sphere
- Halt
- DVR alternative
- Greek X
- Authentic
- Sheltered, at sea
- Hare's defearer
- Japan's main island
- Comic Phyllis
- California
- wine valley
- Zero
- Enchilada holder
- Plate
- jiffy
- Fix a stubborn shoelace
- Rowing need
- Sulk
- Harasses
- Male cat

DOWN

- Hexagonal state
- Members
- Missile house
- Divisible by two
- Fails to
- Bullring VIP
- Lotion additive
- Yemeni city
- Scrap
- Anger
- Got up
- They're between
- Let fall
- Locks
- Chorus
- Longtime record label
- Celebrity
- Big fuss
- Smell
- Winged
- Corporate symbol
- Profound
- Raw rock

Solution time: 24 mins.

Saturday's answer 6-24

CRYPTOQUIP

NU E LRH HEPZNCJ QUCF
SK ZCOW E IKFRIQNOFCA
SNLZSCJ ZNU HQUPOCU E

PKJSAEPSNKJ PKJSAEWSNKJ?
Saturday's Cryptoquip: FOLKS ARE FOREVER TRYING TO TRACK DOWN MY HOME. YOU WOULD THINK I'M LIVING IN A HUNTED HOUSE.
Today's Cryptoquip Clue: N equals 1

BEETLE BAILY by Mort Walker

BEETLE, LET'S GET THE NEW YEAR STARTED RIGHT!

YOU DON'T WANT TO BE THE WORST GOOF-OFF IN HISTORY! GET TO WORK!

HENRY by Don Trachte

REMEMBER TO FEED THE BIRDS

YOU ARE LATE FOR SUPPER, HENRY! MARCH STRAIGHT LIP TO BED!

I CAN SEE THE HISTORY BOOKS NOW... "WASHINGTON AT VALLEY FORGE," "EISENHOWER AT D-DAY..."

"BEETLE AT THE SINK"

GREG + MORT WALKER