

# Private universities in Bangladesh: An effective innovation in higher education

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FOR last 20 years the economy of Bangladesh has been growing at the rate of 5% on average. This growth has been witnessed by the changing composition of GDP in the major sectors. Currently over 50% of GDP comes from the service sector and about 30% from manufacturing industries and agriculture contributing to just under 20%. This transformation in the economy created demand for higher education in the country. Given the problem of expansion of higher education in the public sector the government was convinced to pass an Act in 1992 for establishment of universities in private sector. That matched the expectation of the entrepreneurs. By now private sector universities enrollment reached 60% of total students in the campus based universities. The current government gave permission to set up 20 new universities mostly outside Dhaka. Previously there was a concentration in Dhaka. Even after this fast growth of private universities the ratio of enrollment of the age cohort (18-25 years) has just reached 5% only. In India the same ratio is 15% and in South Korea it is 50%, in Singapore it is 100%. In this background we have to recognize the constraints faced by the universities in Bangladesh especially the private universities. The primary constraint has been shortage in supply of qualified teachers because universities need teachers with higher degrees from within and outside the country. There is clearly a lack of policy support from the government in this respect and the private sector is not yet ready to make that kind of investment. Private universities are not allowed to offer M. Phil, Ph. D. programmes although some of them have the required capability.

The government entrusted the UGC to supervise all universities in Bangladesh. Although it has not provided any kind of assistance to private universities. There is only one member of UGC who deals with over 70 private universities. Naturally the UGC's role has not been conducive to the private universities. It has tried to follow certain conditions laid down in the Private Universities Act 2010. Most stringent condition has been not to grant permission for any new program of study to the universities unless they move



to their permanent campus on one acre of land within Dhaka city area and two acres outside Dhaka city. For the last 3 years excepting 6-7 private universities who moved to their own campuses, the rest 50 could not expand their programmes to meet rising demand for enrollment in existing rented premises. We also did not see any effort by the UGC to visit campuses on a

regular basis except when there were issues involving administrative and ownership conflicts in some private universities. UGC has only one member responsible for overseeing private universities both old and new.

There was an attempt to establish an "Accreditation Council" as per the Act of 2010. That would have been premature any way given the shortage of qualified teachers in most of the disciplines. On the side of the private universities there exists an Association of Private Universities with an elected executive committee. They also seemed to have become fatigued with the rapid growth in new universities, some clearly were granted permission last year on political considerations by the ruling party. Given the absolute shortage of qualified teachers these universities will find it difficult to operate in remote places.

The role of the press in fostering smooth development of private universities has not been helpful either. Instead of obtaining facts from the observation they simply publish reports based on information given by the UGC on so called compliance regarding permanent campus and outer campuses of some of the private universities. We know a good press is essential to foster desired growth in institutions in both public and private sector. We would expect the press to observe functioning of private universities on one to one basis as they operate to meet growing demand for higher education in Bangladesh. Just like the growth of RMG industries & MFIs, private universities have proved to be innovative and effective institution in Bangladesh. They need cooperation from all concerned to consolidate the growth that has already taken place. There is clearly an urgent need to increase the supply of qualified teachers among other constraints in campus development.

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# The joy of teaching

GOLAM SARWAR CHOWDHURY

WHERE there is formal learning there has to be teaching; and if learning is not easy can teaching entail much joy? Learning may be difficult and the learner may face multiple challenges; but with motivation, discipline and dedication the learner can eventually overcome all obstacles to reach the goal of learning. In formal education at all levels, teachers are as yet indispensable to make the learners' difficult work a little easier. The teacher also has their own joys without which they would lack the inspiration and motivation which they must have in common with their students.

What are the joys of teaching then, particularly in a country like Bangladesh and generally in the context of the rest of the world? One of the greatest living scholars of Bangladesh, Professor Serajul Islam Chowdhury has written as to why he had stuck to teaching in the early 1960s when many of his friends and colleagues were so keen on joining the erstwhile Pakistan Civil Service. According to Professor Chowdhury, he could never ever think of leaving behind the Dhaka University library which gave him an opportunity to continue seeking knowledge throughout his life.

This of course is the opinion of a scholar, a real pundit, who was not attracted by what the Civil Service could have given him in terms of power and plenty of worldly benefits. There were many others, who were not of the calibre of Professor Chowdhury, but found teaching as a profession that gave them opportunities to learn more and at the same time be of help to their students.

I began teaching as a Lecturer in the Department of English at the University of Chittagong in 1981. All teachers, from Lecturers to Professors, shuttle to this University from the city in uncomfortable buses which virtually turn into ovens during the summer. My first journey to the University campus on one of those rickety buses in the summer of 1981 is still an experience that I fondly remember and would do so the rest of my life. Scholars of the level of Professor Mohammad Yunus, Professor Anisuzzaman, Professor Abu Hena Mustafa Kamal, Professor Rashid Chowdhury, Professor Murtaza Baseer, Professor Zia Hyder, to name only a few, were passengers on the same bus, and this thrill of being with them in the vehicle was something unique for me. Even at that young age I could understand that these luminaries of the academic world didn't care about the comfort of a chauffeur driven

official car, or an office that looked more like a luxurious lounge. They were all thinkers who were committed to learning, to the creation of knowledge, and disseminating knowledge to their learners, and through them, to the rest of the world.

During my 25-year career at Chittagong University one of the greatest joys that still give me energy to go on was the evolution of my relationship with my students. As a young Lecturer, I was very close to those with who I shared whatever little I knew. They were more of friends rather than students; and as years passed by I always wanted to remain a trusted friend to my students. My relationship with my students was not limited within the classroom: I met them outside, at times in my parents' house where I used to live. They would come to me in groups to clarify something I had said in the class that they didn't quite understand. Teaching of this kind was much more informal: interspersed with witty comments, jokes



and bursts of laughter.

As time passed by, and as I started growing older, my students seemed to be quite shy and more formal when they met me outside the classroom. On most occasions we would find out an empty classroom to discuss topics that were not clear to them. I had no office of my own where I could ask them over for these discussions. Even as an Assistant Professor, I had to share a room with three other colleagues, a setting not really congenial for discussions or tutorials. But then in academia you can't expect pomp and extravaganza that one has to forget in an institution where learning, and more importantly, the creation of new knowledge, is the most important activity.

But then as academia introduces students to new and sometimes stunning ideas, it's not done in an atmosphere of strict regimentation. Universities are institutions that espouse the spirit of freedom too! For training the mind, an

environment befitting the energy and zeal of the youth has to be in place. Students would take part in cultural activities, sports and games of different kinds. In addition to their studies, these activities help the students to display their creativity and sporting skills. Throughout my long stay at Chittagong University, I always encouraged my students to use their creative energy in a healthy manner for their own benefits. Education can never be all about rigorous training of the mind without occasional strolls on gardens of creativity. While education trains the mind, creative works allow the mind to relax for a while.

As technology continues to develop, can we really envisage a classroom where students will interact with a robot that would turn on device and students would complete their lesson? Although I have no doubt about the progress of science and the wonders it would create in the future, I don't believe that the machine can ever


replace the mind. Because after all it's the human mind that has created the machine; it's the human mind that has built civilizations; it's the human mind that has solved the mysteries of the medieval world. Therefore, a teacher will always be the person in control of a classroom even after a century or more.

Among the many joys a teacher gets in life is the love and respect they receive from their former students. I become extremely emotional when suddenly I find a stranger touching my feet and asking me if I could recognize him or her. "Yes, of course, you look familiar; which year did you graduate?" "I finished my Master's in 1995, and I just admired your

Derrida classes." This is enough for me to bring back old memories as I hug him fondly and ask about what he does now. Yes, he teaches at a government college somewhere, or she works for the police; but what matters is they have not forgotten their teacher. This is the ultimate tribute of a student to their former teacher which may be difficult for people in other professions to comprehend. Teachers at levels beginning from primary to University have surely had this reaction when coming across a former student after many years.


If I'm asked as to what is my greatest joy in teaching? The answer would be the inexplicable feeling after teaching a satisfying class. It's a sensation that can't be explained but which lingers on for a very long time.

The writer is is Professor of English at University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh.



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