

The proposed pay scale of public university teachers and the suggested VAT on private universities are two issues that have recently rocked the education sector of the country. In light of these issues, Upashana Salam and Naznin Tithi spoke to the incumbent chairman of the University Grants Commission (UGC), Professor Abdul Mannan, and former chairman of the UGC, Professor Nazrul Islam, respectively, about ways that challenges faced in higher education can be meted.

University teachers must be given due respect as well as benefits



Professor Abdul Mannan
Chairman, University Grants Commission

The Daily Star:Public universities of Bangladesh rank low in global rankings. What, according to you, are the challenges in the higher education sector in Bangladesh? What is UGC doing to tackle these challenges?

Abdul Mannan :Times Higher Education, a magazine that determines the global ranking of universities, considers five parameters to rank universities. One of the parameters was industry-university relationship, i.e. how involved are universities with research in collaboration with different industries. In Bangladesh, this number is absolutely insignificant. That's why the universities of Bangladesh cannot rise up in these rankings.

However, the good news is that right now the University Grants Commission (UGC) is executing a project called The Higher Education Quality Enhancement Project (HEQEP), which is funded by the World Bank in collaboration with the Government of Bangladesh. The UGC, in different phases, is trying to help enhance the quality of tertiary education both in the public as well as private sectors. The project will come to end by 2018. During Ramadan, five projects were allocated to three universities which will collaborate with different industries by taking up projects that will benefit the industry.

We have expanded education reach all over the country in the last two decades or so. Around 3 million students study in tertiary level; from six universities in 1971, we now have 38 public and around 82 private universities. However, the biggest challenge is creating and maintaining the quality of education. We often can't provide proper infrastructure, for example, labs, libraries, etc. to ensure quality education. Most of the young, meritorious graduates are reluctant to come to the teaching profession. The main reason behind this is that they don't find the teaching profession to be as attractive as the corporate sector.

Moreover, we don't have any organised or institutional facility to train faculty members on a regular basis. We aren't able to appoint good teachers despite the fact that many foreigners also work in our country but in different sectors, not necessarily in education. There are few universities that recruit foreign teachers. But we definitely want our teachers to be home grown; we can't be dependent on foreigners to improve our education sector.

The allocation of resources is another big challenge. The UGC is still regulated by an Act of 1973; when it was enacted, there were only six public universities with only 30,000 students enrolled in tertiary education. Over the course of time, the number of universities has grown manifold but the power of the UGC has not increased in any way. Amongst the UGCs or similar bodies of this region, the UGC of Bangladesh is the weakest in the sense of what we can or can't do. My predecessor Dr Azad Chowdhury, (Professor Dr AK Azad Chowdhury, former chairman of UGC) tried to convert the UGC to a higher education commission akin to other countries, thus allocating more power to the commission, to its chairman and its members.

This is in the pipeline but nothing tangible has happened till now. However, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and the education minister are very sincere about this issue. We are very hopeful that in the shortest possible time, this

will work out for the greater benefit of the country. We are talking about Bangladesh moving into the category of middle income countries but in order to do that we need quality human resources, which cannot be created without quality teachers or education institutes.

TDS:The new proposed pay scale of public university teachers is lower than that of military and civil bureaucrats. What's your view on that?

A M: I recently had a meeting with the Association of Universities of Bangladesh (AUB) on this issue. They have been protesting for a long time regarding this lowered pay scale, as they feel that their position has been downgraded along with their pay. I believe that if you want good teachers to come in, university teachers must be given due respect as well as benefits, otherwise it will be difficult to retain them.

If you look at our neighbouring countries, university teachers are better off than the teachers of Bangladesh with better benefits, teaching facilities, environment and position. We are hopeful that this proposed pay



scale will not actually be implemented. I have always felt that the Awami League government, whenever it has been in power, has always been knowledge friendly. Thus, I firmly believe that the prime minister will intervene before any decision is taken regarding the pay scale that has been announced.

TDS: Do you think that 7.5 percent VAT on private universities is logical? Why should the burden fall on students instead of the universities?

A M: I am not aware of any country imposing VAT on higher education. I think Bangladesh should not be standing alone in this respect because education should not be treated as a commodity. Private universities already have to pay 15 percent tax on surplus revenue. They have to buy all their utilities on a commercial basis while their faculty members have to pay income tax. They are also not subsidised in any way. I believe that the government also has the scope to come to a rational conclusion in this case as well.

The justification of imposing VAT is not very strong



Professor Nazrul Islam
Former Chairman, University Grants Commission

The Daily Star: Public universities of Bangladesh rank low in global rankings. What, according to you, are the challenges in the higher education sector in Bangladesh? What is UGC doing to tackle these challenges?

Nazrul Islam: Giving scope for admission to all aspiring candidates who have the desire to study in universities is one challenge. The other big challenge is providing quality education. Maintaining or enhancing the quality of education has been extremely difficult over the years. The number of universities has increased, but the demand can still not be fulfilled.

Since the establishment of private universities in 1992, the trend of going abroad for higher education has been largely reversed. Now we have more than 80 approved private universities in the country. So the quantity challenge has been satisfied to a large extent. But the challenge of quality is still there. We say, in higher education, there are three sides of a pyramid: access, affordability and quality. The tuition in the public universities is almost insignificant but other expenses – living expenses, cost of books, etc. - are quite

NI: Their protest is very legitimate. The pay scale of the university teachers should not be below civil servants. If you look at the neighbouring countries -- India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka -- you will see that their teachers are paid two to three times more than the teachers in Bangladesh. If you want to attract high quality faculty, you must pay them well. Senior professors of public universities were always at par with the secretaries and so on. In fact, university teachers should be paid higher than civil servants. We don't have senior professors, we have senior scale professors. That means only a portion, maybe one third or one fourth of all professors are given senior scale grade. In Sri Lanka, they have a grade of teachers who are called senior professors, similar to how we have senior secretaries in Bangladesh. Of course, the number of senior secretaries is very limited, maybe 10 or 20. The number of secretaries is also limited, maybe 100. But the number of professors in public universities is quite high. So one can question why there should be so many professors or senior scale professors. If we have a smaller number, maybe we can demand much higher salaries for them. But our tradition has been to keep a similarity between the civil servants and university professors, which should be maintained.

TDS: Do you think that 7.5 percent VAT on private universities is logical? Why should the burden fall on students instead of the universities?

NI: In some countries, like the Philippines, there are two kinds of private universities – profit and non-profit. Universities which declare themselves to be for profit are normally taxed but non-profit universities are normally exempt from tax. In Bangladesh, both private and public universities declare themselves to be non-profit institutions. That means the justification of imposing taxes including VAT is not very strong.

However, if the government imposes a VAT, the pressure actually falls on the students. These universities are developed on tuitions and other fees taken from students. Donations and contributions are also a part but the main income of these universities is tuition fees. The year-end balance will probably show you that the profit is more than the expenditure. But because they are declared as non-profit, this surplus has to be reinvested in the development of the universities. Some private universities have invested in improving the quality of their universities, which is praiseworthy.

Thus, it depends on how we look at it, how the NBR looks at it. The reason for imposing the VAT could be that they found that the money has not been properly invested for the welfare of the university, and a lot of money has probably been channelled out or invested wrongly.

The government or the UGC should closely monitor whether students are unnecessarily burdened or whether tuition fees are disproportionately high compared to the income of the guardians. In private universities, it is not only tuition fees but other expenses like development fees or convocation fees that a student has to pay. Convocations do not necessarily have to be very expensive. Similarly, all other events can be done at a low cost. The basic objective should be for private universities and the government to keep the tuition as low as possible, while ensuring quality education.

"The education of all children, from the moment that they can get along without a mother's care, shall be in state institutions at state expense."

— KURT MARX,
THE COMMUNIST MANIFESTO

BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES

by Kirkman & Scott

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Gave form to

7 Need to

11 Soup choice

12 Savvy about

13 Film set on Pandora

14 Some stories

15 Kicks back

16 Sneaker features

17 Different

18 Conquest?

19 Paper buy

21 Relieve

22 Sense of humor

25 Bunny move

26 Try out

27 Classroom item

29 First-rate

33 Colorful flower

34 Principled

35 Free of skin

36 Impair

37 -- out (got by)

38 On cloud nine

39 Ruby and Sandra

40 Ore workers

DOWN

1 Rude thing to do

2 Crude home

3 Stockpile

4 Sewing aid

5 Cockpit guesses

6 Louis -- (old coin)

7 Back biter

8 Symbol of chastity

9 Metal marble

10 Flung

16 Gentle ones

18 Check writer

20 Door sign

22 Abandon

23 Helpless

24 Footstool

25 Piled up

28 Watermelon waste

30 Make a speech

31 Beeper's kin

32 Goes downhill

34 Niger neighbor

36 Rep.'s rival

Yesterday's answer

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| S | T | A | K | E | D |
| L | A | M | E | R | M |
| O | M | E | G | A | B |
| W | A | R | S | A | L |
| E | L | I | C | E | Y |
| D | E | C | E | N | T |
| A | N | G | E | L | O |
| S | A | N | D | A | R |
| A | M | I | R | U | N |
| L | E | D | U | P | C |
| A | L | I | O | S | E |
| D | I | A | D | E | R |
| S | A | T | E | S | S |

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Ruhi Shamshad Ara Jhumu
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Dilu Road, New Eskaton, Dhaka

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Dilu Road, New Eskaton, Dhaka

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