

Private Universities: Successes and Challenges

Recently The Daily Star organised a roundtable on 'Successes of and Challenges Before Private Universities.' Eminent educationists and vice chancellors of renowned private universities participated in the discussion, which focused on the contributions of and challenges faced by private universities. Here we publish a summary of the discussions.

Mahfuz Anam, Editor, The Daily Star

After the recent terrorist attacks, private universities have come into focus in a negative way, which is unfortunate. The perception that private universities are 'elitist' is one of the image problems that these institutions suffer from. Another issue brought out against private universities is that the curricula do not reflect national aspirations. There is also an allegation that some private universities sell certificates. This image is quite in contrast to their real contribution. I think many of our private universities are quality institutions, and some of them can be termed as "centre of excellence". These universities have established links with well known global institutions and through exchange faculties have made significant contribution to spread the latest research and knowledge.

Our roundtable titled 'Successes of and Challenges before Private Universities' will try to bring out the achievements of private universities and the tasks that lie before them.

Professor Jamilur Reza Choudhury, VC, University of Asia Pacific

I would like to first start with the legal provisions under which private universities are operating. The Private University Act 2010 mentions explicitly that surplus money or any surplus generated by the university must be reinvested. However, there are allegations that unaccounted money is being siphoned by the authorities of many private universities. If we look at the genesis of private universities, some universities initially, or even now, have been sponsored, and these so-called founders believe that they own this 'business.' And many believe that since they invested money in the university, they would get some returns. The 2010 Act has tried to change this attitude of university authorities but if not strictly monitored, the so-called founders or sponsors will continue to siphon off the money meant for further investment in the institute.

When the Act was first promulgated in 1992, it stipulated that a statute needed to be formed. Till today, no university has been able to create the first statute, even though when I was at BRAC University, we did send a draft to the Ministry in 2001 but it was never returned. The lack of a statute leads to the operational variations in different universities. Public universities have statutes that give details of some of the operational aspects that should be followed by all of them.

Another issue that is concerning is members of the trustee board of some universities are often paid a large amount of money in the name of honorariums. There needs to be a ceiling in this regard. Thus, there should be some improvements in the legal umbrella and infrastructure.

The Act stipulates that private universities should provide tuition waiver for students from freedom fighters' families, and those belonging to poor students, those belonging to remote areas, and other disadvantaged groups. This, I believe, is being maintained by most private universities.

If we compare the per student operation cost of private universities and public universities, we'd find that there is not much of a difference. The only difference is that students of public universities are enjoying free education while this advantage is not made available to students of private universities. The capital investment cost is, however, much higher for public universities.

As an educator who spent 38 years in public education, I can state that the difference between private and public university curricula is that public universities offer a lot of freedom in this respect. If I, for example, want to add a course to the syllabus, I can organise a faculty meeting with the Board of Studies, get it approved by the Academic Council and amend the course likewise. But that freedom is not enjoyed by private universities. The process of getting any change in a course approved is very lengthy. After the initial meeting with the faculty and approval from the Academic Council, the proposal is sent to the UGC which subsequently passes it on to an anonymous reviewer.

Media had initially tried to make generalised statements by asserting that the terrorists of the recent attacks were exclusively from private universities. The fact is that this is not limited to private universities alone. Students spend



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around 1500 hours in a year at the university. The rest of the time they are either in their residence or with their families. It should be noted here that a large number of students live in hostels, so there is need to ascertain the environment there as well.

There is a common complaint of lack of research in private universities. Not one university of Bangladesh – public or private – has been able to make a place in the top 200-300 universities of the world or even the region. This is unfair from the point of view of private universities. Most enrolments in private universities are at the undergraduate level. What research can be done at the undergraduate level? Teachers cannot conduct research alone; most research is usually done by graduate students in top universities. But there are success stories even here. The American Society of Civil Engineers has listed one of our students as one of the ten young faces of civil engineering globally in 2015.

Professor Abdul Mannan, Chairman, University Grants Commission of Bangladesh
At present, 95 private universities have the permission to run their operations, out of which 84 are functioning. The number of students studying in private universities is, to be exact, 4,63,767, out of which 40 percent are women. There are 37 on campus public universities.

I have always maintained that I don't want to differentiate between private or public university. A university is a university. In the subcontinent, originally all universities were sponsored by the government. But with the growing number of people who seek higher education, it is not possible for the government alone to manage/sponsor tertiary education. Private universities are here to stay; they will keep on expanding with the growing number of people seeking higher education.

Unfortunately, private universities are in the news for the wrong reason. Quite a large number of private universities in Bangladesh are doing an excellent job, even though the age of private university education is relatively less.

But the problem arises in universities where the activities of members of the board of trustees are not transparent. Members of board of trustees can often be very influential. At present, establishing a university has become a status symbol. And sometimes, even loan defaulters seek to and are able to set up universities. Problems further arise when the board of trustees interfere in the daily activities of universities.

The VC's role is very limited in many private universities and their main task is to implement the decisions taken by the board of trustees. I have always urged board of trustees to leave the education of universities to the faculty members and the academicians.

In our country, the whole sector has been defamed only because of a handful of universities. Transparency on the part of trustee members and university founders is key.

Dr. Mohammed Farashuddin, Chairman, Board of Trustees, East West University
There is an allegation that private universities don't teach the history of Bangladesh to its students. There is also a complaint that under the name of a three credit course titled Bangladesh Studies, there is an attempt to cover everything. Some of them only teach language. Private universities should pay attention to this issue.

There are both good and bad among private universities. It is saddening when all private universities are bracketed together. Moreover, we should not discriminate between students of public and private universities.

To address the challenge of land shortage, Dr Akbar Ali Khan made an excellent proposal to create a common park for private universities where there will be scope of co-curricular activities. But no government has shown interest in this proposal. We need to engage our students in creative activities so that they do not turn to extremism. Recently a proposal was made to form the student wing of a political party in private universities to make the students politically aware. I do not think it will work like that.

Professor Atiqul Islam, VC, North South University
In terms of the achievements of private universities, since 1991, a huge number of students in Bangladesh have been studying in private universities. Where would these students study if not for private universities? Earlier, most students seeking admission to tertiary education and not getting the opportunity would try to complete their education abroad. However, thanks to private education, this trend seems to be on the decline. Undergraduate education in some private universities is comparable to some of the best in the world.

Among various challenges we face, providing residence facilities to the students is crucial. We have 22,000 students but there are not that many dorm halls. If there were university dorms, there would be dorm/house tutors who could keep

an eye on students. Another problem is the recruitment of teachers. World class universities such as Oxford and Harvard do not see the origin of their faculties. In our country, we cannot hire world class academicians because we can not match their salary expectation. In Bangladesh, we do not have enough qualities PhD staff to recruit from. Private universities are not allowed to offer PhD in any subject. So where will you get good teaching staff? I would recommend that at least some private universities are given the scope to enroll PhD students on selective subjects where the institutions have expertise.

Professor M. Omar Rahman, VC, Independent University Bangladesh
Unfortunately, there is an incorrect perception that still persists in media that only children of rich parents study in private universities while poor, capable students study in public universities. This, I believe, is a caricature, which is further promoted by the media. When we make a profile of parents of our students, we find out that a vast majority of them are small business entrepreneurs and service holders. I think it is important to correct media

perception about private universities.

Media should accept the fact the majority of students pursuing higher education go to private universities. We need to focus on private universities in a way that stresses on the fact that what happens in private universities matters to the whole country. It is no longer a marginal sector.

Another important point is that we need to focus on higher education rather than fussing over the public-private divide. It is not true that students who do not get admission in public universities go for private universities. I can claim that most of our students choose our universities as their first choice because we are providing superior quality education to them.

Professor Syed Saad Andaleeb, BRAC University
We need to focus on imparting basic skills to the students: critical thinking, good communication, basic math, digitally competence and global awareness. Another important sector is research. Most of the faculties we recruit locally do not have any knowledge or exposure to research. How can we expect them to do research? So we must invest in the capacity building of PhD

programmes. If we want to generate our own resources we need PhD programmes. Otherwise our brilliant staff will go abroad, and many of them might never return.

We can introduce multidisciplinary subjects to keep pace with the changing world. For example, private universities have biology, engineering and medical science. If you put them together you will have biomedical engineering. This is an emerging field. Our private universities are capable enough to introduce these programmes. I do not think we need to take the permission of UGC to introduce these programmes.

We also need to focus on the supply chain of education. You cannot change everything through four years of university education. Our plans on developing our student force need to begin from primary education.

Professor Imran Rahman, VC, University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh

Nowadays, many private universities are focusing on research. They are trying to access international funds for research as well as generate their own funds for research. It needs to be accelerated.

I think private universities are more student centric. Here students and their parents bear the full cost of education. So I am bound to listen to them. It ensures greater monitoring and accountability. On the financial aspect, we are also accountable to the board and UGC. We have to submit annual reports of our accounts to the UGC. We are also internationalising the whole education sector. In public universities, you do not have any scope to accommodate foreign faculties or Bangladeshi academicians who have earned fame abroad. Thus, private universities are able to avoid inbreeding of same old pedagogy which is predominant in the public universities.

Our biggest challenge is funding. We are totally dependent on fees. In foreign countries, the local government provides land to private universities. In Bangladesh, we have to pay for land from our own pockets. That's why when there are talks about 'controlling' private institutions, it irks us. There is no need to do the micro-management of private universities.

Dr. Carmen Z Lamagna, VC, American International University-Bangladesh
We oblige all the regulations of the government. In return, we do not get any support from them. We have to purchase our land. We do not get any fund from the government. I would suggest that when any decision is taken in regards to a private university, the representative of the university should be included on board.

I want to float an idea to form a consortium. One university might have expertise in engineering and another have the best facilities in medical science. Why can't we share our resources? We can share our libraries and teaching staff. In context of the present turmoil, private universities should work together. We can't solve our problems alone.

Professor Golam Samdani Fakir, VC, Green University of Bangladesh

Private universities are non-profit entities but we have to pay taxes. This is a contradiction. The government should remove this tax burden so that we can divert the money for research.

We need to change our teaching methods. You can't teach people creative thinking by giving lectures hour after hour. We need to adopt active learning methods. In Bangladesh, we do not have institutions to train faculties for tertiary level. Achieving good grades and being a good teacher are two different things. We should offer training for aspiring teachers before recruiting them in universities.

Professor M. Rezwan Khan, VC, United International University

We need to focus on the supply chain of our education system. At the university level, you can't teach students, as they do not know how to learn. Producing more and more GPA 5s cannot be the goal of education.