



The growth of private universities in the country, in terms of both number and quality, is phenomenal. Their contribution in bringing about excellence in the higher education scene of the country is undeniable. However, challenges still exist in this sector. In order to take this effort of ensuring quality education forward and establishing global standards, these challenges need to be identified and addressed. In this regard, The Daily Star recently spoke to Vice Chancellors of some of the leading private universities of Bangladesh to recognise the prospects and challenges, and better understand how quality education can be ensured at the tertiary level.

We are in the business of building human assets

PROFESSOR SYED SAAD ANDALEEB, PHD
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AS one of the leading universities of Bangladesh, BRAC University emphasises quality education. Five things are vital to the University to ensure quality: good faculty, good students, good administration (management); innovative programmes, and decent amount of resources.

To maintain the standard of faculty, training of teachers is vital. We have developed a Professional Development Centre at BRAC University where we provide proper andragogy training for the teaching staff. At this time, we are also recruiting teaching staff at upper levels. It will be helpful for launching graduate programmes. We are also reviewing the curriculum to make it relevant to the times.

We are providing general education courses to students in order to develop five crucial skills. These include critical thinking, communication skills, quantitative skills, digital competence, and global awareness.

We are developing good connection with the CEOs of prominent companies as we want to prepare our students with good advice for the job market. I think the employers have a role to play as they need skilled employees; thus, they should engage with the universities. They should also let us know about their needs.

Public universities get resources from the government. But we do not get a single penny. We rely on our surplus to build resources and add value. To assure quality education, we are trying to apply modern teaching methods such as flipped classrooms, interactive approaches, group discussion, problem solving, etc.

Research is also important to our University to generate contemporary local knowledge to serve communities that often face tremendous adversities. We provide good research facilities, including grants, for our faculties. The students who get a minimum CGPA of 3.7 are given the opportunity to be part of the scholars programme. They are actually required to do research with their faculty members.

BRAC University's computer science unit is going to



launch the first nano-satellite early next year. In this regard, we are a pioneer among the universities of Bangladesh. Our Architecture department is innovating on habitat – to establish cyclone-resistant habitats in the coastal areas. We are getting involved in 3D printing. Our residential semester takes students away from Dhaka and engages them in various creative programmes. Another significant research project is on efficient use of solar energy under the EEE department.

The Business school is creating an index to monitor service industries. Under this project, for now, they are developing a customer satisfaction index for the banking sector. We have state-of-the-art facilities in our science labs that are in the process of being further upgraded. Our institutes are forging ahead in areas of public health, education, and governance studies. Humanities and social sciences are engaging in innovative projects. We have very skilled and prominent senior professors, some globally recognized.

We are very interested in launching graduate programmes –

even PhD programs if possible – in collaboration with other private universities. But there are challenges. UGC cannot fully rely on all private universities to offer PhD programmes. They have good reasons. There is a clear shortage of quality teaching and research staff to launch meaningful PhD programmes. I think a successful PhD programme requires quality mid-level teaching staff like associate professors and assistant professors. The reality is that we lack mid-ranking teachers in sufficient numbers – the proverbial “missing middle.” I believe the top private universities can form a consortium for launching PhD programmes to establish graduate programmes and build research capabilities internally.

Another challenge is that we are often not allowed to open new graduate programmes. If you don't have enough graduate programmes, you don't build enough qualified researchers to study various sectors. I hope the situation will improve. UGC Chairman Professor Mannan has been very cooperative and is helping us in many ways.

Accreditation is a very crucial issue. I was engaged in the accreditation process while teaching in USA. My experience is that it's a peer managed process. The government should not directly engage in the accreditation process. They may have oversight responsibilities. Direct engagement should be among peers. Proper accreditation also needs time to take root. I think initially it can be done through global partnerships.

Credit sharing is another crucial point. Students may be given opportunities to accumulate transferable credits from one university to another after establishing equivalence. I believe in strong cooperation among the private universities. A regular meeting is currently held among the vice-chancellors of nine private universities chaired by Professor Jamilur Reza Chowdhury. We are working collectively on two things - the quality of teaching and the quality of research. There must be scope for joint research and sharing our knowledge systems with each other – like cooperating while competing!

We have close affiliations with many reputed foreign universities in USA, Canada, Australia, Japan, China, Sweden, etc.

Bangladesh needs strong and capable human capital. This is what the country needs to invest in on a priority basis. I know that the government has many programmes, but I strongly recommend increasing budgetary allocation in the education sector. Especially, the government should link primary and secondary education to higher education – a supply chain perspective – to ensure coordinated and overall quality of education. Unless education quality improves at lower levels of the chain, you cannot transform lead into gold.

We have to struggle even harder to improve the basic qualities of our students – good moral values, ability to think (not memorize), sports, cultural engagement, conversant with the country's history and much more. I think it's not just our duty to build human capital. The government should take creative initiatives to recruit quality teachers at the primary and secondary level, provide incentives, train them well, and create a defined fast-track career path for high achievers. There are presently many projects going on in the education sector. That's good, but we need to properly assess them, learn from our mistakes, and build an enduring and quality education system. Proper management of educational institutions is vital if these goals are to be achieved.

We also need greater cultural transformation. A university is not a place where you only come to study. Universities should be a fun place. Students should feel happy to come here, not feel obliged or forced. In this regard, BRAC University has 28 different student clubs with distinct social missions.

My parents were teachers of Dhaka University (DU) and I was brought up in the DU campus which is very large and endowed with many facilities – a huge asset to transform students into human capital. Nowadays it's not possible for a private university to acquire or build such a big campus. We even have to rent fields for our students and faculty to engage in sports like cricket.

Finally, I would like to say that we (the education system) are in the business of building human assets. They will serve the nation. The success of our students is paramount. We need to devote greater energy to this mission and expect more cooperation from various stakeholders.



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