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BUILDING BLOCKS OF TOMORROW

Achieving our higher education targets

ABDUL MANNAN

That there has been a revolution of growth, expansion, and reach of higher education in Bangladesh is a reality. This is no longer a matter of debate, but a matter to reckon with. Currently 3.2 million students are enrolled in tertiary level education compared to only 31,000 in 1972. The total tertiary enrolment over the next decade (2016-2026) may reach 4.6 million according to an estimate made by the University Grants Commission (UGC) of Bangladesh. Of the total number of students currently enrolled in tertiary level education, the theology based Islamic University (Fazil and Kamil Madrasas are affiliated with IU) accounts for 8.2 percent of total tertiary enrolment while the National University that is affiliated with all degree colleges of the country accounts for 72 percent. The 32 public universities and 84 private universities currently functioning together claim around 23 percent of the total number of students pursuing higher education. Set up in 1973 under a special Presidential Order when the country had only six public universities, four general and two specialised, UGC is the apex body that monitors the academic and administrative (partially) activities of these universities.

According to the United Nations and other estimates, 48 percent Bangladesh's total population of around 160 million is below the age of 24—a staggering figure of potential human resources much needed, not only for Bangladesh, but for developed countries also, where the total population is ageing very fast. The country's wealth lies in its youth, provided the youth can be turned into human resources with proper education, both technical and general. For this to be meaningful, a faster transformation must take place from certificate based education to knowledge based education, both explicit and tacit. Knowledge based education can only be delivered through the creation and dissemination of knowledge in the proper environment and with the right people. A certificate does not guarantee knowledge. It is just a piece of paper and is not worth the cost of paper it is printed on, until and unless its bearer can prove his or her worth. The present system is good for creating 'educated' certificate holders, but not productive human resources in most cases. The reasons are manifold. First, the belief that one must hold a university degree at any cost after he or she passes his or her higher secondary certificate course is misleading. The degree seeker spends four to five years chasing the degree, gets it, only to find out that in the real world, the degree is practically worthless in terms of the time and money the holder has spent for it.

Capitalising on this attitude of the certificate chasers, there is a rush amongst universities and some colleges to offer degrees in business, but not in technical or vocational education. In Finland, a country known to have one of the finest education systems in the world, every student must take technical courses up to eighth grade. Someone who vies to get into the civil service can go to colleges for a bachelor's degree. Only school teachers need a master's and researchers have to have a PhD or equivalent.

In Bangladesh, the craze for a university degree can be self-defeating. When a Sanskrit or Arabic graduate looks for a job in a bank or the government, the big question is what good is the degree for jobs in these sectors? When we say we want to see Bangladesh become a middle income country by 2021, such mismatch has to change. Young people must be encouraged to go into technical and vocational education more. While establishment of new technical universities or vocational institutes is a step in the right direction, when these very institutions want to offer courses like business, then there is a problem.

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Such universities must integrate liberal arts into their main courses, but there is no need for courses in liberal arts or social sciences in specialised technical universities. The good news is that in recent times there has been a quantitative change in the enrolment in technical and vocational universities or institutions (not only universities). 10 years back, only one percent of those who passed high school entered vocational or technical institutions. Currently, the figure stands at 14 percent. It is expected that at the rate at which enrolment is increasing, the figure may go up to 20 percent by 2021. This is a good sign. However, the worrying thing is the constant decline in enrolment in basic sciences. This is a global phenomenon, and if it does not change, the creation of new knowledge may prove difficult. Without the addition of new knowledge, the entire education system may start to collapse in the near future.

The need for updating the curriculum at regular intervals must be acknowledged by universities. Knowledge in most disciplines is changing at a rapid pace. Unfortunately, in most cases, the curriculum in courses like medicine, technical subjects, information technology (IT), business and economics is dated and based on theories or practices which are either no longer valid or have become obsolete. The reasons for not updating the curriculum as and when needed are: (a) the need is not felt; (b) the additional resources needed are not available; and (c) teachers needed for delivery are not available.

Ironically, in Bangladesh, a fresh university graduate can instantly take up teaching without acquiring any training for teaching skills, assuming that a good and meritorious student translates into a good teacher. Such presumptions can prove fatal. To become a good teacher, necessary skills must be acquired through training, but sadly there is no scope for training university teachers. At the college level, the situation is somewhat better. At the tertiary level, especially in universities, one single critical problem can be identified—the lack of qualified and experienced teachers. Two probable ways to address the problem are to retain qualified retiring teachers with better benefits or to raise the retiring age of teachers. In many countries, certain professionals do not retire, teachers being one of them.

In developing curricula for job driven courses, there is no mechanism in place to have inputs from the industry or the employers in our universities. In such cases students may be spending their time and effort learning things no employer needs. Currently, there are 400,000 foreigners working in Bangladesh and siphoning out USD 5 billion annually. Eight million Bangladeshi expatriates working in the Middle East and other countries remit less than USD 14 billion annually. The only reason local employers employ foreigners is because they have the right type of education, skill and attitude.

Until 1992, university education in Bangladesh was provided by the state. Often the demand for university education outstripped supply. Hundreds of students would leave the country for higher studies, not necessarily enrolling in good institutions. There would be huge drainage of foreign exchange and many would return with sub-standard educations. Few entrepreneurs took the initiative to establish universities in the private sector. The government enacted a law in the parliament in 1992 (replaced by a new one in 2010) to establish such universities. The beginning was modest, and the intention of the promoters holy. A small number of students enrolled in the first few universities, but with the passage of time, things began to go out of control with the mushrooming of such universities across the country, many turning out to be fake universities selling degrees.

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