

Prioritise service over profits

It's high time for the government to fix charges of private healthcare services

Health Minister Zahid Maleque, in a press conference on Thursday, stated that the government would standardise and fix charges for different services provided by healthcare organisations, as well as set a limit on what services they can provide based on their respective capacities. He made the remark following a meeting of the relevant stakeholders, including the authorities of private hospitals and the representatives of the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS). Given the exorbitant – and oftentimes illogical – fees charged by different private healthcare facilities for the same service, or the substandard services that are provided at these institutions despite the high rates, the DGHS' proposal is no doubt a much-needed move.

However, this is hardly the first time such a proposal has been made. A similar initiative to regulate service charges in 2019 fell through the cracks; health ministry officials blame the pandemic for the failure to implement the proposal over the last three years. Yet, the fact remains that it was precisely during the pandemic that the government should have played a critical role in ensuring fair and ethical charges for services at private hospitals. A study conducted by the Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) found that, on average, a Covid-19 patient had to spend over Tk 450,000 for treatment at a private hospital, which was more than 12 times the expense at public healthcare facilities. Driven by the crisis of beds at public hospitals, lower- and middle-class people had no choice but to turn to private facilities, with many families having to sell off their assets simply to pay their medical bills. Why did the health ministry remain so oblivious to the plight of the public at a time when they should have acted with the utmost urgency to ease their sufferings?

The situation now is hardly any better. With little to no government control, private hospitals, clinics and diagnostic centres continue to charge approximately 20 times as much as public institutions for the same service. Some institutions charge 32 percent more for the same tests. It is hardly a surprise, then, that a study conducted by the Health Economics Unit (HEU) under the health ministry last year found that the out-of-pocket (OOP) health expenditure in Bangladesh was the highest in South Asia and more than double the global average. Meanwhile, a large number of private healthcare facilities – many without registrations – continue to provide poor quality services and treatment, far beyond their capacity, with very little monitoring from the government.

Access to healthcare is a basic human right and the state should ideally provide this service for free – or at heavily subsidised rates – to the public. Given the overwhelming pressure on the public health sector and the scarce resources allocated towards it in Bangladesh, the private sector has played an instrumental role in filling in some of the gaps and making healthcare services accessible to many in a timely manner. However, there has to be limits on how much more a private facility can charge for the same test, and systems of accountability must be put in place to ensure compliance with government rules and regulations. We urge the government to implement the recent proposal with urgency, prioritising its citizens' well-being over the profits of private facilities.

Where's the ecosystem for our tech sector?

Bangladesh's position in the global digital entrepreneurship systems index is shocking

At a time when digital technologies have completely changed how entrepreneurs and enterprises envision doing business, Bangladesh still seems to be stuck in the analogue days. The Asian Development Outlook published a new index – the Global Index of Digital Entrepreneurship Systems (GIDES) – of digital initiatives of 113 countries, including 21 ADB member countries, in which Bangladesh has ranked 96th by scoring 12.5 points. This is unfortunate given the fact that our young population has great entrepreneurial skills and they have shown us what they can do using technology during the pandemic.

The GIDES has measured the quality of an economy's environment for digital entrepreneurs through some indicators, such as institutional infrastructure; legal framework and taxation; market conditions; physical infrastructure; human capital; knowledge creation and distribution; financial arrangements; and networking and support. While most developing countries that are members of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) are lagging far behind the developed countries in all indicators, Bangladesh's performance is particularly weak. It performed extremely poorly in informal institutions and practices (one of the indicators), scoring only 2.1 out of 100.

The question is: why do we have such bad scores? What is holding back our digital entrepreneurs from doing businesses? Why can't we create a conducive environment for them? Reportedly, Bangladesh's start-up ecosystem is weak compared to those in countries such as India and Singapore, and our entrepreneurs are failing to attract new foreign investment due to myriad challenges, including a lack of proper guidance and training, bureaucratic roadblocks and outdated regulations. The corruption and poor governance that are eating away at all sectors are also slowing us down as a nation and hampering our potential in the digital landscape.

The government needs to provide fiscal incentives to facilitate tech start-ups and urgently revise its laws and regulations to be more forward-looking. We need to re- envision our education system, starting with making technologies more accessible at all levels, and make our universities capable of playing a pioneering role in creating and enabling digital entrepreneurs. Providing entrepreneurs the necessary training on fundraising techniques and running digital businesses successfully is crucial. Also, the government must ensure that they don't have to go through unnecessary hassle at the respective government offices while registering their businesses.

The Asian Development Outlook report has revealed how innovations centring digital technology have sustained the entrepreneurs in global competitions as well as helped their respective countries to move forward in expanding their enterprises. We must learn from these experiences, so that digital entrepreneurship can play a vital role in the economic growth and development of Bangladesh.



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

Dr Shamsad Mortuza is a professor of English at Dhaka University.

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

A leading national daily recently ran a lead story on the inverted pyramid of academic ranks of university teachers or the UGC prescription on the teachers' workload calculation. The headline read, "Many professors, few lecturers." The story based itself on UGC reports to estimate that there are 4,528 are professors, 2,657 associate professors, 5,283 assistant professors, and 2,672 lecturers in 53 public universities across Bangladesh. At Dhaka University, there are 2,234 teachers in 83 academic departments under 13 faculties and 12 institutes. Of them, 871 are professors, 610 associate professors, 426 assistant professors, and 327 lecturers. The situation is similar in other public universities.

In an ideal world, there should have been more lecturers, who would get their PhDs before being moved on to the next level. The academic rank diagram needs to look like a pyramid where few professors are located at the apex. A top-heavy administration is never a healthy sign for any institution, and my comments may sound smug, made by someone who has made it to the top. The reality is the provision of restructuring has allowed the universities to reshuffle the posts in which they were initially recruited. The number that you see at the top is in most cases designated for a lecturer, and unless someone retires at the top, the scope to recruit a new lecturer is blocked. The system has been so bundled up that there is hardly any differentiation between a lecturer and a professor. In my department, I have the same workload as that of a lecturer: we teach the same number of courses, have the same number of students in tutorial groups, and act in the same number of exams and other committees. The recent proposal of the University Grants Commission (UGC) to assign workload is a welcome suggestion.

The problem lies not in quantity, but the quality of recruitment and promotion. More importantly, do we know the scope of a university teacher, and why it is different from other professions? I don't think even many of my colleagues know, or want to know, the answer. The autonomy promised under the University Act, 1973 provides some flexibility that allows teachers to benefit from restructuring. But it also paved the way for some wrong perceptions about and apathy towards the freedom enjoyed by a university teacher.

Up or Quit



There has to be an ideal intellectual balance between teaching and research in our universities.

VISUAL: STAR

Our public university system was modelled after the British system, which is very conservative in promoting professors. In contrast, the American model involves an "up or quit" style in which teachers are expected to perform for their promotion regularly. They need to "publish or perish"; they need to bring in research funds to pay for their salaries and/or arrange the tuition fees for their research graduates. Failure to do so will expose the weakest link for an inglorious "goodbye." This is the neoliberal model that is being applied by some of our private universities.

Under the 1973 act, a university teacher can lose their job only due to "moral turpitude" or "insanity." This freedom has allowed many of us to abuse the system, making us susceptible to public scorn. The allegations are serious: one can become a professor simply by dint of one's service length and required number of publications in "trash" journals. Lately, universities have restricted the number of journals for promotional purposes. As the acting chair of the UGC has said, "We cannot change what has been done. But we will make a fresh start."

The most important change that we need involves transparency and accountability in governance. We need to nurture meritocracy without political or personal consideration. I don't think when I was recruited as

designation. I realised I should not have joined the university or got my promotion before completing my doctoral research.

Most of our universities started as teaching universities, and are only recently feeling the pressure of increasing their research portfolios to be benchmarked against international rankings. A teacher is no longer expected simply to "confine to the transmission of received knowledge to generations of students" (ibid. 85). There has to be an ideal intellectual balance between teaching and research. It is only prudent to follow some of the best practices to regain some of the lost glories of the teaching profession. The first of those is to earn credibility before our owners: the taxpayers. That can be done only if the system is transparent and competitive.

In India, for instance, they have set the National Eligibility Test (NET) or the State Level Eligibility Test (SLET) as the minimum eligibility condition for recruitment and appointment of assistant professors in universities, colleges and institutions. Only a candidate with a PhD can be exempted. In Sri Lanka, an assistant professor with a PhD must teach for six years before becoming a professor. In the Philippines, teachers are given three years to receive tenure after their initial hire. Otherwise, they cannot continue

research, and practice. Thus, they do not pit a science faculty teacher against someone from fine arts. They do not have a one-size-fits-all system to measure the expertise of their faculty members.

Unfortunately, in our country, an aspirant teacher who is still in his first year calculates who is going to be the department head at the time of their graduation, which political party is likely to be in power, and which thesis/lab supervisor has the political say or the regional connectivity. It is precisely such abuse of freedom that gets the most public traction. Hence, we hear about teachers acting like party cadres, VCs recruiting their wives, selling faculty and admin posts to the highest bidders, and victimising and stigmatising candidates for donning adversary colours.

As university teachers, we need to realise that the freedom that has been entrusted with us comes from the love of the people and their hard-earned taxes. Their sweats have no party colour. They have given us the duty to educate their children. And for that, there should be no compromise. We need to up our game or quit. The challenge for us is to make every position count for its quality. Once we do that, the numbers will automatically fall into place.

Making social protection nutrition-sensitive

Saiqa Siraj is country director of Nutrition International in Bangladesh. Eadara Srikanth is Asia programme manager for technical assistance for nutrition programme at Nutrition International in Bangladesh. Richard Morgan is programme director of social safety net programmes at Nutrition International in Bangladesh.

SAIQA SIRAJ, EADARA SRIKANTH and RICHARD MORGAN

Bangladesh has made rapid progress in health and nutrition over the past decade. There has been a significant decline in stunting among under-five children, as well as a rise in life expectancy. The country's hunger score improved from 34 in 2000, to 28.6 in 2012, to 19.1 in 2021. The Global Hunger Index also noted its achievement in reducing undernourishment, under-five mortality rate, and wasting of children.

However, Bangladesh is yet to achieve nutrition security for its entire population. As per the Bangladesh Demographic Health Survey (BDHS), 2017-18, stunting and wasting in Bangladeshi children are still above global averages. The Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES), 2016 put the percentage of people living below the poverty line at 24.3.

The Covid-19 pandemic and the restrictions imposed in its wake have affected people's livelihoods, food security and health; it has rendered the poor, especially women and children, even more vulnerable. It was estimated that the pandemic would increase the nation's poverty rate to 35 percent. With the loss of income and rise in prices of essential commodities, 23 percent households from urban slums and 15 percent households from rural areas cut down their food consumption during the lockdown

period. Disruption in several services such as immunisation and sanitation services, and closure of schools and pre-schools (providing meals to children) portend a malnutrition crisis which, if not checked, will swiftly undo all the gains of the past several years. The pandemic is a pointer to why investing in health and nutrition is critical for the population's well-being, immunity and resilience. The response to the pandemic and the combat against malnutrition must engage the joint forces of all development actors.

Social security programmes (SSP) are the Bangladesh government's primary instruments for supporting vulnerable groups in the country. There are around 120 such programmes being implemented by 23 ministries and divisions, targeting 27.8 percent of the population, though the number of programmes and the extent of coverage vary from year to year. The National Social Security Strategy (NSSS), adopted in 2015, seeks to streamline and strengthen the existing safety net programmes for better results from the money spent. They include schemes such as cash transfers, food transfers, school stipends, employment generation, and other subsidy programmes. As per the NSSS human development strategy, SSPs, among others, must address the root

causes of malnutrition.

The Bangladesh National Nutrition Council (BNNC), the nodal agency that provides guidance in formulating nutrition policies and ensuring that nutrition is mainstreamed into all government policymaking, reviewed selected SSPs. The review revealed that there is scope for improving those programmes' gender and nutrition sensitivity in order to improve nutrition outcomes for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged segments of the population.

For social protection to be nutrition-sensitive, programmes need to be combined with interventions that have a direct beneficial impact on nutrition, such as supply of micronutrient fortification of food, referrals to nutrition-specific services, promotion of diversity in agriculture, behaviour change to promote diversity in diet, and recommended care practices as well as designs that help ensure equitable distribution of food and resources to women and children within families.

Though there was an increase in the total number of beneficiaries under SSPs from eight million in 2010 to 11 million in 2016, there were considerable rural urban discrepancies. Around 36 percent of the beneficiaries were from rural areas and only 10.5 percent were from urban areas. Nearly 40 percent of the Bangladeshi population now live in urban areas. Despite better utilisation of nutrition services in urban areas than in rural areas, the nutrition status of the urban slum population is much poorer than that of the non-slum population. This calls for stronger focus in the targeting of nutrition-sensitive SSPs based on the available data for urban slum population.

As part of addressing a wider spectrum of the population, different programmes were designed targeting different beneficiary groups without having a clear transition strategy for the beneficiaries from one programme to another along their lifecycle. Moreover, individual programmes seemed to be designed to resolve a particular vulnerability; a comprehensive approach to address multiple root causes of vulnerability would have been better for avoiding duplication, efficient use of limited resources, and provision of comprehensive support for the beneficiaries.

A recent review by the BNNC and Nutrition International found that many of the largest SSPs did not include a nutrition situation analysis in their initial design, nor nutrition-related outcomes in their monitoring framework. Many programmes are also not evaluated regularly and do not publish annual performance reports. There were gaps in coordination and collaboration between various agencies addressing the same target groups.

Various ministries and departments need to go beyond the "silo" approach and work in collaboration to achieve nutrition outcomes. A data infrastructure is necessary to cut across the implementing ministries so that targeting and reaching beneficiaries is more effective. Better coordination and data-driven evidence for further strengthening the SSPs are needed to make them more visibly nutrition-sensitive. Good nutritional status and growth are foundations not only for vulnerable people's rights and well-being, but also for future equitable growth and prosperity.