

## EDUCATION

# Are private universities ready for PHD PROGRAMMES?

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With the recent updates from University Grants Commission (UGC) stating that they are seriously considering allowing private universities to hold PhD programmes, a wave of excitement has seemingly passed through the field of academia in Bangladesh. However, with it comes confusion, fear and several questions looming in the distance, yet not too far away. The bottom line of all this worry is simple: are private universities ready to offer PhD degrees?

A PhD programme is inherently research-intensive which means that the very structure of a PhD programme is expected to be completely different from anything a student may have undertaken thus far. There are, obviously, certain expectations to be met by the supervisors and the university at large. On this, Salekul Islam, Professor at the Department of Computer Science and Engineering at United International University, sheds light.

"While we are undoubtedly excited about the prospect of private universities finally having PhD programmes, they must be closely monitored to ensure that the quality of education and training offered is of the highest calibre possible. To ensure this, we must start with ensuring that the supervisors who will be responsible for a candidate's PhD are up to the task," he says.

He further adds, "Just having a degree does not mean you are up for the task— a supervisor should have an in-depth understanding of their particular niche. Not just this, we will also need to ensure the presence of an external board of examiners consisting of researchers outside of that specific university. After this, a solid infrastructure can be built."

According to Prof. Salekul, both the aforementioned criteria are standard and crucial practices. However, what may be more pressing for private universities in the country are issues regarding internal infrastructure and a potential lack of funding.

With the ostensible lack of research facilities and resources in mind, research may not be feasible for every single domain. However, with time and the development of a healthy culture dedicated to academic research, there is a possibility of alleviating this issue.

Mahbubul H. Siddiquee, Associate Professor at BRAC University's Department of Mathematics and Natural Sciences, says, "On the one side, I think we are definitely

very positive towards this change as those faculty members who are actually interested in research can have experienced researchers working for a long time to answer a particular research question," he states.

"But caution must be exercised, as not all private universities are of the same calibre. While it is true that some private universities may be capable of meeting the requirements, many others struggle to meet even the most basic undergraduate or master's level needs for their students. In this regard, UGC should obviously not allow *all* the private universities to provide PhD degrees. Maybe a handful of them initially, which can then be observed for the next few years to see their

important point to consider is that even though most public universities in Bangladesh are capable of granting a PhD, the truth is that not all the public universities that have this ability have the necessary infrastructure, or even the faculty body, to take in PhD students.

Not just that, the culture around academia isn't necessarily one that has developed to a healthy position yet, and as such many problems are found deep within its trenches. Associate Prof. Mahbubul further elaborates on this topic saying, "In some public universities, the culture around PhD degrees has become corrupted and rife with foul play and nepotism— and this is largely due to lack of oversight from UGC. If private universities are allowed to grant PhD without any real oversight, we may end up having the same problem over here."

However, hope still remains that private universities across the country will be able to foster a culture of research at a PhD level. Associate Prof. Mahbubul and Md Kabir Uddin, Assistant Professor at North South University's Biochemistry and Microbiology Department, highlight the need to work with collaborators both in academia and industry in order to gain access to facilities that one single university may not be able to provide.

Assistant Prof. Kabir says, "As it stands, access to funding is limited, but I wouldn't say that it doesn't exist. If we manage to work together and create big changes over time, there is no doubt that more funding will come our way. We may not have access to all kinds of equipment for the time being, but we still need to start somewhere. And only in a few years, the change that can be brought about may be immense."

On the topic of availing funding, Associate Prof. Mahbubul notes that "Of the funding that is available from the government, most of it is inaccessible to professors from private universities. There is obviously something wrong here that needs to change at a systematic level."

A similar concern is shared by students, who have commented on the availability of resources for research at undergraduate and master's levels of education. Nayara Noor, a 23-year-old Master's student studying Microbiology at BRAC University, says, "In some ways, yes, there is a huge scope for research but this is only possible when universities collaborate with the industry or other universities. What we have right now can, otherwise, feel very limiting even at a master's level."

As such, the reality of the situation highlights several systemic barriers that stand in the way of private universities from being functional institutions able to grant PhDs. However, is it not time for these things to slowly take change?



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progress, and after a thorough review proper changes can be made," adds Associate Prof. Mahbubul.

Whether a university should be allowed to hold PhD programmes, ultimately, is a discussion based on the logistics of what the university itself is able to provide—and this factor varies based on fields of study quite drastically.

Labiba Rifah, a 24-year-old Master's student studying English Language at BRAC University, says, "Since much of my work will depend on reading a lot of papers, I can use my university's help to access them. However, for any sort of fieldwork that I may have to do, I do have my doubts that they will be able to help. A PhD in my niche would mostly function in the same way. If a university is willing to support their students, I think people in my field may benefit from it."

According to Associate Prof. Mahbubul, another