

In Pursuit of Quality Higher Education in Bangladesh

Professor Dr. Abdul Mannan Choudhury*

Educationist, Columnist and Vice Chancellor of the World University of Bangladesh
amchoudhury@wub.edu.bd

The higher education field in Bangladesh has shown all the upward trend. The number of university was only 6 at the time of liberation and it is now 138 of which 96 of them are owned and managed by the private individuals organized under trust. Uptil 1991, there was no existence of private universities in the country. The number of students admitted in all the universities have gone up significantly. Each of such universities started with 2 or 3 faculties and 5-6 departments with meager infrastructural facilities and teachers and with largely incompetent administrative staff. Most of public universities have failed to float need based courses. The number of teachers in both public and private universities has seen several fold increases, the expenditure has gone up. Only thing that has gradually gone down is the quality of education. It has been found that 47% of the graduates are unemployed whereas overall unemployment rate has been found to be 5%. The seemingly best university of the country failed to occupy a honorable place in the league table of world's 2000 universities.

While the session jam became intolerable in public universities, the university halls turned into den of undesirable activities, the teachers, students and employees, instead of pursuing respective roles turned towards making quick gains, then many well to do families turned to start sending their children abroad causing drainage on the national exchequer as well as creating cultural shock and brain drain.

The remedy was sought in the establishment of private universities which could not provide the desired service. The private universities Act of 1992 with amendment in 1998 did not improve the situations. Thus, the quality of education recorded a falling trend in the private and public sector equally. Then a million dollar question is what is to be done?

The answers are:

Upgrade and Streamline the Mission, Vision, Philosophy, Goals and Objectives:

Most of the institutes of higher education especially the universities in Bangladesh have one or other mission, vision, philosophy, goals and objectives. Most of these are destined to disseminate knowledge often irrelevant, instead of creating worthwhile and useable knowledge. Moreover, most of them paid little attention to the ideals and aspiration of the nation and over all education policy of the country.

All institutes of higher educations must therefore, revise their philosophy vision, mission, objectives and strategies. The traditional objective of creating and disseminating knowledge for knowledge's sake must be overhauled. Each degree must be market oriented.

The presidency college, Kolkata, has achieved success in enhancing the quality of higher education by changing its vision, mission, objectives and strategies, allocating more resources, encouraging donation from private parties by making the donation tax free and allowing whitening of black money by investment in education as well as by releasing higher amount of research grant, scholarship, stipend for higher education.

Redesign Courses & Curriculum and duration of Programs:

Most students register for liberal courses in public universities. The students are admitted in Arts and Humanities, Commerce and Business, Science and Technology and Medical Science and others. Compared to other countries, bulk of the students read in commerce and business followed by Arts and Humanities with apparent neglect of science education. This is probably one of the reasons for high level of unemployment among higher educated.

The private universities tend to admit students in utilitarian programs. The BBA, MBA, Mechatronics, Health care management, Tourism and Hospitality Management, Physiotherapy, laboratory science, EEE, CSE, ICT, graphic design and performing arts are the order of choices by the student, Mechatronics is only course pioneered by World University of Bangladesh-which also offers MBE as a substitute of MBA. There is a general tilt towards quick yielding courses.

Duration of Programs:

Most of the affiliated and constituent colleges of the public universities offer 2 years and 3 years degrees programs. Autonomous or semi-autonomous teaching centric public universities offer 3 or 4 years undergraduate program and 1 to 2 years Master program. A handful of them also offer M.phil and PhD programs. There are medical, engineering, agriculture, ICT and nursing education in universities or specialized institute of learning of 4 years duration. The 4 years programs were designed as terminating degrees. But in practice, there is rush for Master Degree making the class size extremely large and lessons offered by not that competent teachers essentially difficult.

Increase Infra-structural Facilities & Resources Allocation:

Government spends less than 1% of the GDP for the academic institutions. Only 4.78% of this is earmarked for the higher education. The total allocation is falling every year. In many countries at least 7% of the GDP is earmarked for education of which more than 60% is kept for higher education. These have adverse effect on quality education in the form of inadequate infrastructural facilities, as well as recruitment and retention of competent teachers.

The bulk of expenditure is recurring in the public sector. The amount ear marked for research in private universities is as meagre as that of public universities. The money is spent mostly for participation in seminar and publications of journal. Most of the private universities are busy in providing Library, laboratories, on line facilities for consulting books and audiovisual facilities. Since these universities are owned largely by well to do sponsors the scarcity of any of them are met on pressure from UGC. However, shortage of competent teachers is yet difficult to make up. The UGC is thinking of sending working and retired teachers of public universities to private universities. Some universities have been using retired teachers of public universities on wider scale.

Change Admission & Grooming Pattern of Students:

According to latest statistics the number of student stand at 3.36 million in public and private universities of the country. Among the public universities, national university having no part in teaching and insignificant role in research has the highest number of students (nearly 2.8 million) in its under graduate and graduate programs followed by Bangladesh open university (0.91 m), Islamic university (.09 m) and other public universities.

A significant portion of the post secondary students without proper grooming at that level go for higher education. The numbers of registered students were only 120,000 in 1970, immediately before liberation war. Now with the great surge of students, the older

universities experience great rush for admission, whereas many affiliated and constituent colleges fail to fill up their quota of students.

At the end of 2015, the number of students at private universities stood at 361000 which are increasing at least by 10% each year. Besides the national university and Bangladesh Open University, the private universities intakes constitute about 60% of the total enrolment in the higher education. None of the private universities got any permission to admit students in the M.phil or PhD programs, causing yet more shortage of teachers and researchers.

Mode of Admission of Students:

All the public universities pick up their inputs by centrally administered Admission tests. Such students have normally 12 years of total schooling; however, diploma holders having 14 years are allowed to take part in the admission test if they have requisite CGPA in the previous examinations.

Students are admitted in private universities on the basics of previous results of examinations & administration of admission tests or combinations of both like that of public universities. The intakes for graduate study are captured from undergraduate programs. Theoretically, all students are admitted in halls of residence, but all public universities hardly accommodate a third of the inputs in the halls of residence and hostels. The halls and hostels have been reported to be highly mismanaged presenting an uncongenial environment for education, not to talk about quality. There was a time when house tutors used to perform teaching functions at night but now the sheer size compelled them to abandon this practice totally.

The private universities hardly have any residential accommodation for their students, teachers and employees. However, they go on outsourcing for students and pay much higher salaries enabling teachers and employees to live little more comfortably.

Means of attracting better inputs for quality:

In view of the inequality of income between urban and rural folks, the students emanating from rural areas should receive more of the scholarship, stipend, fee waivers and residential facilities. Besides, steps towards obtaining better inputs for the university may be obtained by-

- a) recruiting meritorious students including women and disadvantaged section of the community without resorting to corruption and mal-practice.
- b) Providing scopes for extra-curricular activities, internship, project participation, education loans and excursion
- c) Introducing ICT facilities at all levels including at the residence of the students.
- d) Providing supervised residential facilities to students even by resorting to outsourcing.
- e) Providing scholarship for the talented and needy and avoiding the talented of the rich family.

Orientation programs for students:

Students after admission must be properly oriented with all that needed to continue a healthy corporate life. The attendance requirement must be strictly followed and there should be both end of term and continuous assessment. The length of each semester must be uniform for all. Courses should be offered to enhance the creation of entrepreneurs. Efforts may be geared to close down or squeeze the size of departments that inflate the number of graduate unemployed.

The teachers and employees must be active participants in quality enhancement program. The teachers must complete the syllabus before taking any examination. The project paper based on internship should be encouraged. All students must receive knowledge in ICT and improve their communication skill. Leadership skill may also be injected through extracurricular activities. Ways must be worked out to accommodate more students near the teaching faculties. Outsourcing may be employed for transport and medical facilities for non-resident students. This will reduce the corruption in selected aspects of university administration. The examination result should be published immediately to provide feedback to the students. A second or third examiner for each element of assessment may be employed if student airs injustice.

Strict disciplinary measures must be initiated for examination and other offences and punishment for eve leasing, drug addiction and moral turpitude must follow. In others words, the present scenario of freedom for all must be replaced by transferency and accountability along with autonomy.

Competent Teaching Staff: The Recruitment and Promotion of Teachers

We have noted that the factors for deteriorating level and standard are many and certainly quality of inputs and quality of teachers count much. No amount of enhanced ICT and other inputs shall promote higher quality if it is not imparted by competent teachers. The qualified teachers through proper grooming and training shall turn into ideal teachers in course of time, if picked up objectively. This requires the overhauling of recruitment and promotion of teachers.

Usually, there is one committee for the recruitment of Associate Professor and Professor as well as Promotion of the Associate Professor. A separate committee normally headed the Pro Vice Chancellor appoints the lecturer and Assistant Professor and of promoting. There is no system of promotion in the university; each placement is deemed as new appointment based on Academic qualification, experience, number of Academic publications, experience of extra-curricular activities or expertise in supervision but in practice, only the basic academic qualification; years of teaching and or questionable publications are major considerations for promotion in the public universities. On the top it, all the public universities have devised a way of ensuring career progression. This devise is known as restructuring system. This is nothing but up-grading. A lecturer can gradually upgrade his position to professorial position, through making this as vehicle. This is perhaps one of the dominant reasons for faltering standard of tertiary level education in most of the public universities, which is being exported to the private universities.

Alternatively, teacher can attain a professorial position by obtaining PhD from abroad and having some publications in 12 years time inclusive of the study period. The attainment of home based M.phil and PhD though of dubious quality can also help in quick arrival. The rest of the 40 years career may be congenially passed with increment of salary and other emolument without a single publication or with little teaching. The lazy professor may indulge in politics, begin consulting, private teaching, king making or remain in the process of making himself a king. They are rather the role models to new entrants, not the dedicated teachers and researchers. Others can attain the highest post in 20 years time although the retirement is 65 years for all teachers. Even with the faulty mode of appointment & liberal policy of upward mobility these are acute shortages of qualified teachers and mismanagement causing deviation of standard of education.

But for quality enhancement, the teachers must be meritorious with research bent and should-

- 1) Receive training and higher education at home even by bringing distinguished professors from abroad if sending of them abroad is difficult.
- 2) Receive almost equal salary and other emoluments as that of government employees. The university should discourage low grade local publications and 'accepted papers' for appointment to the next level and avoid appointment of wards unless found suitable even in administrative position.

Some Other measures for attaining excellence in teaching may include:

- 1) Bringing in existence some composite and specialized universities for offering M.phil and PhD degrees.
- 2) Appointing distinguished Professor as visiting professors to act as mentors to the junior teachers.
- 3) Recruiting of international faculties including the expatriates living in advanced country.
- 4) Creating Endowment fund and involving the local business, charities and alumni in funding the teaching and research work.

Moreover, teachers may be turned motivated and made superior teachers by creating additional level of teachers by breaking down the present levels of lecturer, Assistant Professor and Associate Professor and Professor into other senior or junior categories so that the teachers will remain active and motivated throughout whole career of 43 years.

There must not be any promotion for teacher. Each upward mobility should be independently treated. The credentials earned at one level must be limited for utilization in rising to the next level only. The government university must locate additional sources of income even by reducing the size of the classes that produce graduate having limited Job Opportunities.

The teachers must be given a job description. Job specification and person specification. They should be given tenure after completion of number of years of successful service and fulfilling set conditions. They should be given set work load and time table. At the beginning of the semester, each teacher must circulate teaching and evaluation plan.

All research work should be evaluated by REF-type framework and higher rating should be attached to publication in journal of international standard.

No promotion by Restructuring should be given but salary increase may be effected each year so that the elderly teachers may get the salary of professor instead of salary & position of professor. Teachers should be exposed to orientation program and teaching and research methodology courses. The teachers and staff should utilize the period of sabbatical leave for improvement of their quality.

The teachers of the universities must be given a separate pay scale if possible. At present, this is lower than the salary of teachers obtained in 1921. Teachers' position in the order of precedence must be brought above the level of corresponding bureaucrats and they must enjoy VIP facilities at all points of interaction. Their salary and perquisites must be tied with an undertaking of not indulging in coaching or private teaching. The teachers at all level must be evaluated by parties including the students. All these must be done to bring a sense and need for accountability and transferency within the frame work of administrative autonomy and academic freedom, given generally in the universities.

Residence of teachers:

The percentage of teachers receiving residential facilities is hardly 24%, 13% of senior employees only 17% of class three employees and 14% of class four employees enjoy residence facilities from the employers in public universities. The bulk of the salary is therefore, devoted to renting accommodation, which eats more than 50% of the salary. This encourages part time job and running of coaching centers for additional earnings causing little or belated attention to research or teaching. The consulting and part time teaching or coaching cannot be stopped even with harsh measures. The teachers at tertiary levels should be provided with accommodations or house at subsidized level.

Teacher-student rates & impact on quality:

The average ratio of teachers and students in public universities is said to be 1:31. This is rather an impediment towards imparting quality education. The highest ratio has compelled the public universities to abandon tutorial system, house tutoring and viva-voce for the students. The scenario is not that improved in the private universities.

Engage Competent Administrative Staff:

Many people enter the administration in universities by sheer political backing, gradually attain degrees by questionable means and rise to the top without attaining qualitative change. These types of people can help little to maintain and enhance quality. They are often found very autocratic in attitude and behavior because of their connections with the big shots.

The employees of the universities must be employed on the basis of qualification and experience and all promotion must be given by the set principles and procedures to be made known at the time of appointment. Like teachers, they should be given structured job-description.

They must be treated as essentially one of the two winged bird engaged in quality education. The employees of the higher education institutes, at the time of appointment must be as competent as teachers to avoid inferiority complex and tussle with the teachers. They may even be given teaching assignment if found competent. We have found good result by employing Professor cum Registrar, Professor cum Chief Librarian and Professor cum Director of ICT Division etc. in smoothing overall administration.

Overhaul Overall Governance of Universities:

To regulate the academic, administrative and corporate life of the students, there are a number of statutory bodies and statutory activities in 1973 order, or special Act of the Parliament or in the provision of the private universities Act 2010. The statutory bodies are chancellor who is also the president of the republic, Vice Chancellor, one or two Pro Vice Chancellors depending on the size of the universities, dean of the faculties, Director of the institute, Chairman of the Department Committee of Courses. Advanced Board of Studies, Coordination and Development Committee, Academic Council, Syndicate as well as Finance Committee. In the system the Vice Chancellor is elected by the senate but the Pro Vice Chancellor and Treasurer are directly appointed by the Government. The Vice Chancellor heads all the committee except the Finance committee which is headed by the Pro Vice Chancellor.

We think that the quality of higher education suffers because of administrative autonomy of the public and private institutions without accountability. The autonomy has been used for grinding personal ends. The autonomy was so much misused that some teachers became professors without sufficient year of teaching and number of publications. Some of these are named as casting vote professor. The concept of casting vote professor is

satirical and tends to mean professor who was finally promoted to the post by the casting vote of the Chairman of the selection committee or syndicate. Even the chairman gave his/her usual vote to bring equalization and thereafter, the casting vote to change the balance.

The autonomy gave them scope to turn nonchalant, non-compliant and non-committed. There was nothing in the order or any device in the statutes to compel a teacher to be mindful in teaching, obey the order of the supervisors or be punctual in attendance or marking scripts and announcing results. It was often found teachers were more busy in election campaign than teaching. Teachers were involved in manpower business and running garments weeks after weeks and nobody was there to compel them to teach, mark scripts and supervise the project or term paper and thesis.

The departmental chairperson being appointed on rotational basis for three years could not convince or compel his colleagues to comply with the designated role. There were never any written and complete terms and conditions of job in the public university. Though the orders specify teaching and research as the job of a teacher, a handful of them was found in teaching exclusively and many were teaching in private universities or involved in consultancy work or politicking, yet they make their career path advanced through a process called Re-structuring. Initially the Re-structuring allowed one to upgrade his/her level once in whole of the career, but subsequently it is made instrument of upgrading from one position to the next position till he or she becomes professor. The teachers promoted by restructuring even became Vice Chancellor, Pro Vice Chancellor or Treasurer and emerged as role model for the incompetents.

The Vice Chancellor appointed by the government tends to become a pawn in the hands of his/her nominators and the government. The orders provide for election of the Vice Chancellor panel by the senate composed of several stakeholders and beneficiaries. A Large chunk of senate members as well as six out of 17 members of the syndicate and the deans of the faculties are elected. Then, it was expected that present or potential Vice Chancellor or dean or syndicate members shall go on recruiting voters or grooming voters instead of teachers or students respectively.

All these have said to have caused an anarchic situation with drastic falls in the quality of education As remedy, for the last long 40 years or so, press and well-meaning citizens struggled for modification of the university order to inject accountability and transferences.

They suggested that a starting point would be the amendment of university ordinance of 1973. It must be amended to allow appointment of Vice Chancellor from a panel constituted by a Search Committee. Similarly, the election of dean must be abolished and replaced by any other means so that the dean does not become a pawn in the hands of the voters.

The number of other elections should be brought to minimum and just a single day is to be allocated for teachers' and employees' association elections.

Alternatively, some experts suggested to bring changes, firstly, in the election process of the Vice Chancellor by broadening electoral college with increased number of teachers in the senate, decrease the government picked up voters or eliminate the students representation or eliminate the registered graduates members because that involve money game. Then they suggested changes in terms of office for the Vice Chancellor. Many people recommended specific power and authority for the Pro Vice Chancellor. It led to some selected delegation of authority causing at the end all the tussle and power play between the Vice Chancellor and the Pro Vice Chancellor.

Acts for private universities were framed in line with the pattern in government universities except few things and it became apparent that the important determinants of quality remained same but absence of accountability and transference and or no serious

attention to objectives and goals of the universities were found as obstacles to quality education.

Enhance the Role of UGC:

The UGC now has lot of functions including funding partially the private and public universities for quality enhancement, Academic innovation Fund, Research and Education Network and many more difficult tasks. Compared to its functions its capacity and capability are limited which people think may be improved by empowering it to punish and reward the present and potential offenders and do gooders respectively. The UGC- the custodian of all universities failed to arrest the downward trend in quality. Even it tried to inject quality first by introducing quality Assurance Scheme (2003), Quality Assurance Cell (2013) and recently the Higher Education Quality Assurance Project (2015). The results are yet to be seen. However the Accreditation Council Bill after receiving legal blessing may be a remarkable step towards improving quality of education in the country, if it is allowed to work without fear or favour.

References

1. Ahmed I & IQBAL I (ed.) University of Dhaka- Making, Unmaking, Remarking, Prothoma Prokashona 2016.
2. Schreuder Deryck M. (ed.) Universities for a NEW WORLD- Making a global network in International Higher Education 1913-2013, SAGE 2013.
3. University Grants Commission Of Bangladesh – BARSHIK PROTIBEDON 2015 (Annual Report 2015) UGC Publication No. 189, Dhaka, Bangladesh.
4. World University Of Bangladesh-Attaining of Miracles by World University Of Bangladesh, Souvenir of The 4th Convocation, 2017, Dhaka, Bangladesh.