

Higher Education in Bangladesh: Status, Issues and Prospects

Dr. Mobasser Monem

Associate Professor

Dept. of Public Administration

University of Dhaka

Bangladesh

Map of Bangladesh



Institutions which are grouped together to comprise the higher education sector vary from country to country.

In the case of Bangladesh, higher education, also called the tertiary level education is generally used to comprehend the entire range and dynamics of post higher secondary education.

Higher Education in Bangladesh: The Present Scenario

At present there are 80 universities in Bangladesh of which 26 are public and 54 are private universities. Of the public Universities ten are general universities, five are engineering, three agricultural, five science and technological and one is university of arts and culture, one affiliating and one offering education only on distance mode.

Number of Teachers and Students in Higher Education

There are just over 1 million students studying at higher education level in the country. The following table shows their composition: the total number of students in the public universities is 112,430 while the affiliating National University (NU) and the Bangladesh Open University (BOU) have total of 777,492 and 437,500 students respectively. However, in the BOU only 84,271 are pursuing higher education studies.

In 2004 1.3 million of population received higher education in Bangladesh of which 74 percent were male and 26 were female students. The percentage of female students enrolling at the universities is on the rise (UGC :2005).

- The number of teachers in public universities other than NU and BOU is 6280 of whom about 17 percent are absent for different reasons. Leaving aside the absentees, the average student/teacher ratio in the public universities is about 1:18 (UGC :2006).

- The number of National University Affiliated colleges in 2001 was 1297. There were 32278 teachers and 773492 students in these colleges, which meant a 1:24 teacher student ratio. At present, among the graduate and post-graduate students, 83% were studying in national University affiliated colleges and the rest in the public universities (UGC :2006).

Status of Higher Education

- Higher education facilities of the public universities are spread over the entire country, so that students of different regions can receive higher education without going very far from their familiar environment at home. Thus there is at least one public university in all the administrative divisions of the country.



Structure of Higher Education in Bangladesh

- There are 5 types of higher education available in the country. These are: i. General Education; ii. Science and Technology and Engineering Education; iii. Medical Education; iv. Agricultural Education; v. Distance Education. In addition, the higher education sector also provides Vocational and Madrasha education.

Structure of Higher Education

- **In Bangladesh higher education consists of a 3 year pass-course or a 4 year honours course for the bachelor's degree, followed by a two year Master's course for pass graduates and a one-year Master's course for honours graduates.**

Public Universities in Bangladesh

- The area comprising the present Bangladesh was to have no university for a long time during the British rule. A teaching cum residential university was set up first in Dhaka in 1921. The second university was set up in Rajshahi in 1953. In total there had been 6 public universities in the country before 1971. After the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971, during the last 35 years, higher education scenario has greatly been transformed.

The number of public universities has increased significantly. Let us look at some features of Public Universities-

- Enrollment rate has increased
- There has been commensurate expansion of faculty in the universities. The teacher-student ratio, on average, has not varied much. On paper, teachers in the universities have better academic qualification now than before. There appears to be more publications made by academics now than before.
- The expansion is mostly quantitative. Quality of education has not improved.
- In general higher education is highly subsidized. In absolute term the extent of subsidy has been increasing over time.

Features of Public Universities

- In the last decade the share of university allocation to total education reveals a saw-saw trend with, however, a decreasing trend for last three years.
- The employee-student ratio reveals interesting trend. Against teacher student ratio of 1:17 on average, this ratio is 1:5 on the average.

Public universities are the foremost choice of the majority students seeking higher education. This is for various reasons.

- First, these universities offer wide range of subjects in Science, Commerce, Liberal Arts, Humanities, Engineering and Technology, Law, Education and Medicine disciplines.
- Second, public universities attract the best brains and researchers as teachers although monetary compensation for them is anything far from attractive.

- Third, library, laboratory, internet and research facilities are much better there than anywhere else in the country.
- Fourth, seminars, symposiums, workshops, debates, exhibitions and visiting teachers lecture series are often held in these institutions with a wide scope for national and international exposures for promising young knowledge seekers.
- Fifth, residential and boarding facilities at low cost/subsidized rates are available in these public universities.

Financing Public Universities

- Most of the public universities are dependent on government for funding. However, of the 26 public universities the National University is financially independent of the government and very solvent. It derives its entire fund from students' registration and examination entry fees. The Open University of Bangladesh can cover about 30% of its revenue expenses from the fees collected from its enrollees and the rest is financed by the Government through the University Grants Commission of Bangladesh

Financing Public Universities

- **Students Tuition Fees and Other Fees**
- **Government Funding**
- **Trust Funds**
- **Other Incomes:**

Table 1: Public Expenditure on revenue account in some public universities

Universities	2002	2003	2004
Dhaka (general)	31027 (24559)	37496 (22616)	34413 (22683)
Bangladesh Agricultural	83123 (5001)	87761 (5172)	77359 (5596)
Bangladesh Engineering and Technology	34317 (7215)	36007 (7278)	35515 (7501)
Medical University	n.a.	161111 (522)	154430 (553)

Source: UGC Annual Report, 2005 (Note: Figures in parentheses are the total number of students)

Table 2: Revenue Allocation for Education and Higher Education in the National Budget (in Crore Tk.)

Financial Year	National Budget	Allocation for Education	Allocation for Universities	Share of Percentage of University in Education Budget	Share of Universities in National Budget
2000-2001	34597.00	3587.46	288.67	8.05%	0.83%
2001-2002	35479.29	3738.97	293.57	7.85%	0.75%
2002-2003	39945.45	3960.39	323.53	8.17%	0.81%
2003-2004	46263.62	4474.80	389.85	8.71%	0.84%
2004-2005	50069.36	4608.85	409.11	8.88%	0.82%

Source: Bangladesh University Grants Commission, 2006

Modus Operandi of Budgeting Tertiary Education

- Several stages are involved in the budget preparation for funding the tertiary education sector. The focal points of budgeting are three such as the University Grants Commission, the respective universities and the Ministries concerned (Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Finance). In general, the Ministry of Education asks the University Grants Commission (UGC) to submit a provisional budget on the basis of expenditure for 3 months (July, August and September of the current year) by the 31th October of each year.

Quality Assurance

- Quality assurance in this context denotes “All the policies, systems and processes directed to ensuring the maintenance and enhancement of the quality of educational provision within an institution. A quality assurance system is the means by which an institution confirms to itself and to others that conditions are in place for students to achieve the standards that the institution has set”(Donald Ekong: 2003).

Quality Assurance

- As to the public universities, quality assurance deserves more attention because these universities are established by the government and financed through state exchequer. Compared to private universities, the cost of education in these institutions is less as it is highly subsidized. In such a context and wider scope of entrance, vast majority of students enroll themselves in these institutions. On the whole, in Bangladesh the quality of graduates of public universities seems to have deteriorated as seen from the reports of the Public Service Commission and the analysis of opinions of employers both in the public and private sector jobs. This, however, does not mean absence of a small percentage of very high quality of students.

Quality Assurance: Major Problems

- It is largely true that quality of education in the public universities has declined and that quality assurance faces internal and external problems.

- **1. Internal Factors**

- **Student Intake :**

University education is likely to be adversely affected by its poor base line i.e. intake. Quality of education at primary and secondary level is not satisfactory in most cases. Thus the outputs they provide as inputs of universities are found to have adversely affected quality of graduates in line with 'low level trap' (UGC: 2005)

Quality Assurance: Problems

- **Faculty Recruitment**

There are four grades of university teachers such as Professor, Associate Professor, Assistant Professor and Lecturer. There is set rule of recruitment for which UGC has provided a guideline. But universities are found to have modified the rules through their respective syndicate in a lenient way. But the crux of the problem is that the best talent to jobs in education sector cannot be always ensured due to real pay and facilities compared to civil services and private sector opportunities.

- **Staff Development:**

Quality of faculty is not up to the desired level.

Selection procedure though theoretically more or less ideal yet in some cases proved faulty resulting from various factors. The situation as to appointment in the positions of Assistant Professor and above through upgradation/restructuring have proved to be counterproductive. Staff development, both as idea and practice, suffers from a lamentable lack of infrastructure facilities too. Teachers' commitment to search for knowledge, adequate teaching norms of academic behaviour is not above question. Teaching has become another job for some, where consultancy has become more important.

- **Teaching Method:**

The present method of teaching the basic subjects, particularly teaching science at all levels, have been made ineffective by outmoded method and lack of broader aspects of disciplines. The growth of quality education at all levels is based on teaching method to a greater extent which need to be supported with required infrastructure and facilities. Such a situation is very much lacking which needs upgradation.

- **Library and Laboratory:**

Library and laboratory conditions are not conducive to quality education. The teachers in most cases seem to rely on particular texts and the students seems to possess increasingly poorer language ability to comprehend and explore the vast expanse of scholarship that the libraries hold. The libraries are poor as they lack adequate resources to buy recent publications and order for the basic journals. Likewise, the laboratories suffer from inadequacy of equipments.

- **External Factors**

- **Politicization:**

Of the external forces, the prevailing political culture of the country has been identified as being mainly responsible for the fact that the administration, the teachers and students body have all been thoroughly politicized. The net result is factionalism: chaos and session-jam. In fact, the system of linking political parties with their student wing resulting in the open political patronage to student politics has meant many things at once; a student leader can take out a noisy procession on the corridors of an academic building in complete disregard of the classes in progress and this without any permission from any authority he has free access to the highest political leaders either arising from national issue or local/university issue leading to disturbance, closure, strike at the university causing unscheduled suspension of classes.

- **Unplanned Expansion:**

In absolute terms there has been an impressive quantitative expansion in the general university education even though the rate of increase in science and technology sector is not significant. There is no objection to such increase in line with population increase and increase in primary and secondary level output. But the crux of the problem is that such increase always does not correspond to the needs, required infrastructure, faculty and financial facilities (UGC: 2006).

- **Financial Constraints**

University administration faces a host of pressing problem to ensure required facilities for academic development and quality assurance under condition of severe resource constraints. For years it is observed that the governmental budgetary allocation to university education has declined considerably vis-à-vis other levels of education.

Public Universities: Accountability Mechanism

To run universities freely as a centre for academic freedom some facilities like conducive environment for teaching and research, autonomy coupled with accountability etc. are necessary. In some public universities such as Dhaka University, Rajshahi University, Chittagong University and Jahangirnagar University, 1973 University Acts introduced the concept of autonomy, introduced the Senate and established the principle of collective leadership of the vice-chancellor in the Syndicate

- 1973 Act, provided some autonomy theoretically but the concept of accountability of administrative personnel and teachers was very much lacking. Further, neither the chairman nor the Dean who in terms of assigned responsibility, should be authorities to take note of a teacher's failure, whatever may be the nature of failure, is not in a position to play the expected role.

- **Absence of Faculty Evaluation at Public Universities**

Evaluation of teachers help both self development of the teachers and improvement in teaching and quality education. In different countries this evaluation is done through self-evaluation scheme, peer rating, student evaluation and management evaluation. But in Bangladesh the system faculty evaluation is yet to be introduced due to fear of political victimization, although some quarters strongly feel the necessity for introduction of some form of evaluation.

Private Universities in Bangladesh

In the 1990s the government realized the need for setting up private universities as it was clear that the public universities in Bangladesh would not be able to meet the increasing demand for higher education. The government recognized and appreciated the initiatives taken, in the early nineties by a group of educationists to establish private universities. After due examination of their proposals, the government felt the necessity of enacting the legal framework under which private universities could work. As a result the National Parliament passed the Private University Act-1992. It was a milestone in the history of higher education in Bangladesh. With the ratification of this Act, the government lost the monopoly of providing higher education. The first government approved private university was established in 1992 quickly followed by several others

- In 1998, the private university Act was amended to remove some inadequacies and prevent misuse of privileges granted by the Act. At present, we have 54 private universities in Bangladesh. Of the 54 private universities most are located in Dhaka. The total number of students enrolled in these universities is more than 30,000. This number is increasing yearly by 20 percent compared to 5 percent yearly increase in the public universities (UGC: 2006).

Justifications of Private Universities

- **Private universities could be guided by the market related phenomena in providing higher education.**
- **Higher education in the private sector can reduce the financial burden on the government**
- **The condition of private sector answerability can help maintain academic schedules and avoid session jams**
- **Private universities can also offer a better student-teacher ratio compared to public institutions. As a result, attendance, participation and evaluation of students can be more easily ensured and monitored.**

Private Universities: Quality Assurance and Related Practices

The well meaning curricula may not produce good results if the University does not or cannot hire adequately qualified, experienced and committed teachers to teach the courses. While the cases of a few universities are now strong but in general, the faculty situation is very weak. When private universities started in 1993, a few expatriate teachers from USA and only part-time local teachers mostly from Dhaka University were hired. It was understandable in the early stages. But even today, with a few exceptions, most private universities rely on part-time teachers from public universities. To maximize their personal income, these teachers from public universities teach at several private universities, in addition to their full time job at the parent university.

- **Teacher's Capability of teaching and Quality Assurance**

it is desirable that some mechanism be instituted to determine the teaching ability and or commitment of the teachers. Two such mechanisms are (a) student evaluation and (b) peers' evaluation. In line with the American system, some private universities as a matter of routine administer compulsory students' evaluation. This system requires the students to express their views anonymously about the overall performance of the teacher in the class room by asking such question as, did you understand what the teacher taught? Did s/he cover the entire syllabus which s/he distributed at the beginning of the semester? Did the teacher explain again if you had asked for any explanation in the class? Did s/he extend academic help outside the class room? And similar other questions. These responses are evaluated by the university, and the results are forwarded to the teachers concerned. The purpose of the evaluation is to help the teacher improve his/her teaching skill. Similarly, colleagues' opinion about a particular teacher is also sought. All these indirectly reinforce the process of accountability and help improve the teaching quality of the university in general (Hafiz G.A. Siddiqi: 2005).

Transparency in Grading System

- The examination system is a mechanism used to assess the students' performance in a course. In American system, one examiner, namely the class teacher concerned, is the single and final assessor. This has merits and demerits. One demerit is that a particular student may be favoured unduly or deliberately victimized. To avoid such possible unwanted outcome, students are encouraged to seek the examination scripts from the teacher and check the markings to find if any mistake is made or injustice has been done. The teachers are required to be transparent and explain to the student why he or she got "C" and not "A". Such accountability of teachers helps improve the quality of teaching.

Regulations of Private Universities

Private universities are managed in accordance with the provisions of the Private University Act 1992 which is in the process of revision. Ideally, private universities should have a similar administrative structure to their public counterparts, including Vice-Chancellors and other statutory bodies. In reality, in most cases, these administrative structures are not in place. The Vice-Chancellors are appointed by the Chancellor based on the recommendation of the sponsors of these universities. Apparently these sponsors exert considerable influence in managing the affairs of the university. The major impediments of the private universities include: non-compliance with the statutory requirements, absence of consistent admission and examination policies, non-transparent financial management, lack of adequate number of full-time faculty, lack of proper infrastructure, inadequate laboratory and library facilities, absence of co-curricular and extra-curricular activities and a commercial bias in decision making.

Formation of Accreditation Council

The UGC is convinced about the inevitability of having an Accreditation Council to ensure maintenance of a minimum standard and guaranteeing of a quality assurance in tertiary education imparted by the universities in Bangladesh. Since the main purpose of any exercise by Accreditation Council is to inform the stakeholders and the guardians of the students as to the quality of education in an institution and/or of the value of its degree, there is a need to determine yardstick/standards that should be followed by a university in its academic and all related activities (UGC: 2005).

- The UGC is at present evaluating the private universities according to a few yardsticks. It has already set a high powered committee to work out the details of the Accreditation Council. The committee is preparing a comprehensive set of criteria to be used to evaluate both the public and private universities. The committee suggested that the proposed Accreditation Council would have the responsibilities to ascertain if (a) instructions are being imparted according to a modern, scientific and relevant curriculum (b) by well qualified full time faculty members (c) management is transparent (d) examination system is objective and impartial (e) accountability is established in respect of academic, administrative and management matters and (f) compliance of all rules and regulations is ensured.

- The committee suggested that the proposed Accreditation Council would be entrusted with the responsibility of assessing and grading an institution in an overall sense as well as certifying all the components so that the weighted average of the grades can form the overall grade score of the institution. In this process, those who need the assessment of specific programmes would get to know them along with an overall grading of the institution. The proposed Accreditation Council will be autonomous and free from Government control. The government, through the Ministry of Education, will play the role of a facilitator, and provide necessary funding for smooth running of the Council (UGC: 2006).