

Quality Issues of Higher Education in Bangladesh

Professor Dr. Salahuddin M. Aminuzzaman
Department of Public Administration
University of Dhaka
saminuzzaman@yahoo.com

1. Introduction

The education sector in Bangladesh has expanded significantly during the last two decades or more. At present, there are 80 universities in Bangladesh compared to only seven in mid 1980s. The student enrolment in the public universities is about 92000, excluding those in the affiliated National University and Open University¹. The total number of students in the public and private university is about two million

It is generally agreed by academicians, education researchers and other stakeholders that the quality of higher education in Bangladesh has declined steadily, in some areas quite alarmingly, over the last two decades. Such fall in quality has indeed become a core concern of the government and other major stakeholders. It is argued that if quality does not match quantity, and the higher education sector fails to bring out enlightened, highly skilled, trained, motivated and ethically committed individuals, the country cannot meet any of its development objectives. Furthermore, Bangladesh being a human resource export country would miss the opportunity to get an access to the competitive regional and global employment market.

A historical review of evolution of higher education systems reveals that there was no consensus on how these institutions would function, under what rules and guidelines, what they should teach and how, what needs they must address and how the programmes were to be created. A number of commissions, therefore, had been set up since the 1960s to address such issues and bring uniformity in the policies and programmes of the different institutions². One common aspect of these commissions was that they placed education in a broad national perspective, suggesting continuous quality development and stressed the need for relevance. During late 2003, realizing the rather unsatisfactory situation prevailing in our higher education sector, and the urgent need for reforms, the Government of Bangladesh acknowledged the need for developing an overall strategy for higher education. Subsequently

¹ These two Universities have a total number of 800,000 and 437,500 students respectively (in 2004-05).

² Successive commissions included the Commission on National Education (CNE), also known as Sharif Commission (1959); Commission on Student Problems and Welfare (CSPW, 1964-66), also known as Hamoodur Rahman Commission; the New Education Policy (NEP, 1970); Bangladesh Education Commission (BEC, 1974) widely known as Quadrat-e-Khuda Commission; Universities Enquiry Commission (UEC, 1977-78); Interim Education Policy (IEP, 1978); Bangladesh National Education Commission (BNEC, 1978); Bangladesh National Education (BNEC, 1988); Commission for National Education Policy (1997) and National Education Commission (NEC 2003).

the Ministry of Education decided to develop a Twenty-Year Strategic Plan for the higher education sector. Under the guidance of the University Grants Commission (UGC), six expert groups comprising of distinguished scholars and professionals of the country prepared the strategic plan. After a series of regional and national level consultative meetings, the UGC submitted the Strategic Plan to the Government of Bangladesh in May, 2006.

Despite the rapid increase in the enrollment in higher education during the last decade the quality of education remains a serious cause of concern. UGC reports and assessments observed that both public and private universities suffer from quality problems. UGC assessments have identified, with the exception of a few, universities that do not have the facilities needed for quality teaching. The faculties do not have the necessary credentials, and student quality is also poor. The result has been a slide in quality. A large number of private universities have failed to meet the minimum requirements of physical infrastructures, full time qualified faculty, libraries, teaching aids and other facilities that are essential for imparting quality education.

Such challenges of quality education have been recognized at the highest level of government. The honorable President of Bangladesh, who is also the Chancellor of most of the universities, recognized that "Bangladesh is a developing country facing various challenges both from home and abroad in coping with the recent world order and it needs huge component and capable human resources to face the challenges³," The President asked the authorities of the country's universities "to take appropriate measures to provide quality education so that students can prove their worth in the country and anywhere in the world".

With this background, this paper attempts to assess some of the selected factors that have contributed to the overall decline of the quality in higher education and suggest some policy options as intervention strategy.

2. Higher Education in Bangladesh

At present there are 80 universities in Bangladesh of which 53 are private and 27 are public. The demand for educational opportunities seems to have increased dramatically. As a result, the number of students in the private universities is on the rise. Private universities in Bangladesh recorded a phenomenal growth after the enactment of the Private University Act in 1992. According to statistics, whereas in 1998 these universities had 8718 students, in 2001

³ Honorable President Professor Dr. Iajuddin Ahmed, Speech at the 10th convocation of North South University (NSU).

the number increased to 35968. In 2006, private universities had a combined enrolment of more than 100,000. On the other hand, the enrollment in public universities is growing⁴. At present nearly two million students is receiving higher education in Bangladesh. The average student/teacher ratio in the public universities is 1:18 while in the National University the ratio is 1:25.

3. Quality Education – what does it mean?

The word *quality* can be described in terms of *five different approaches* that are used in higher education. These are: Exception (High Standards), Consistency (Zero defects), Meeting the stated purposes, Value for money and Transformation of the participant (the value-added factor). It also refers to the four pillars of education: *learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and with others, and learning to be* (Delors, 1996). One of the prime goals of quality education is to build knowledge, life skills, perspectives, attitudes and values of the students to transform the society into a more productive, sustainable one. Quality education attempts to uphold and convey the ideals of a sustainable world. It takes into consideration the social, economic, and environmental contexts of the country and helps shape the curriculum or programme to reflect their respective unique conditions. Quality education therefore must be locally relevant and culturally appropriate. Enhanced quality of education also helps in setting the goals for formulating national planning through practical application of knowledge for solving the everyday problems of life. What is most important to ensure quality education is to set a *long term national vision*. Such vision provides the philosophy and principles that sets the outline of the plans, objectives and principles of an institution.

A smooth quality assurance system for higher education helps to inspire and create enthusiasm among the learners in their thoughts, deeds, and daily life to establish moral, humanitarian, religious, cultural and social values in personal as well as in national life. That means it gives conscious and careful attention to the development of cultured and respectable personalities in the true sense.

Excellence in higher education in any subject also endows a person with skills and imagination in that corresponding area. The aim of an effective quality assurance system for

⁴ An estimate prepared by the UGC, as of 2005 the projected enrollment was 116,648. But the campuses of public universities can only accommodate 96,592 students. The universities are thus saddled with an extra burden of 20,056 students. Total higher education enrolment is projected to increase from 1,033,049 in 2005 to between 1.38 million to 3.5 million in 2026.

higher education is to make best use of such skills to attain professional excellence without wasting time, labour, talent or resources.

Quality higher education develops leadership qualities in people of different professions and develops awareness in the learners to protect the independence, sovereignty and integrity of the country. A high quality assurance in education in Bangladesh is not only imperative for her internal human resource management but also to survive, compete and succeed in the globally competitive educational environment.

Although Bangladesh has a huge population and has millions of unemployed youths who have completed degree level education, it has a perennial shortage of quality human resources. There is, therefore, a need for literate and skilled human resources to contribute to social and economic development. The university is considered the place where new knowledge is created and disseminated for the welfare and development of human beings. As the primary producer of innovative knowledge, the university should reflect and respond to the life of the people living around it.

In summary, the basic purpose of quality education is to improve students' learning and their experiences in higher education. This is sought to be achieved through:

- changing the method of teaching and learning as well as assessment methods
- renewing the curriculum continually
- updating and upgrading professional knowledge and skills, and
- improving the broader educational, administrative, and resource environments in which teaching and learning take place.

4. Quality Education and Implications on Policy for Higher Education

Higher education has undergone fundamental changes in the past few decades⁵. Universities and higher education systems have faced pressures of increasing numbers of students and demographic changes, demands for accountability, reconsideration of the social and economic role of higher education, and implications and impact of new technologies.

In order to achieve quality, the management of the institution should: a. encourage wide participation from faculty members and students, b. build acceptance and ownership of quality system among all participants, and c. establish appropriate ethos to achieve commitment to quality assurance and enhancement.

⁵ There have been various approaches to quality assurance. In the past, government control over the higher education system was kept in the form of "input, process, and output." Since about 1980s, the "new" approaches, employing five dimensions: (a) aims, (b) method, (c) process coordination, (d) output, (e) outcomes, emerged as a result of the expansion of higher education systems.

Quality in higher education is primarily an academic issue, but has also important cross-cutting (social, political, economic and technological) implications. The quest for quality is attributed to a number of changing phenomena including:

- Changing contexts (i.e., wider student profile, internationalization of higher education and labor market)
- Increased market forces and competition
- Dissatisfaction from employers and students
- Expansion with limited funding
- Demand of accountability from institutions.

5. Quality of Higher Education: Major issues and concerns in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, the higher education (HE) institutions and the programmes being offered largely operate without any sustained and periodic critical review that is needed for quality maintenance and enhancement. No accreditation body exists that could ensure quality assurance and determine the strengths and deficiencies of programmes. Whatever system of quality assurance there is, is generally subjective. In the absence of a scientific mechanism to assess quality in a whole range of inter-related areas such as mission, vision, academic programmes, curriculum, teaching, research, teaching aids, facilities, leadership etc., attempts to measure quality are bound to be unsatisfactory and at best tentative. It is also difficult to set standards for accreditation, since the whole question of quality culture seems a matter of an institution's particular choice.

However, in Bangladesh HE institutions, diagnostic review and evaluation of these criteria are generally absent. There are no known internal quality assurance cells within universities in the country. Most quality control is exercised through administrative review by the departmental head/chairman or deans of the faculties in the public universities.

Both public and private universities in Bangladesh have no external system or method to review the academic programmes of the institution with respect to above mentioned objectives except an approval from the UGC – which is again mandatory for private universities only. The public universities in Bangladesh at present limit their internal quality to:

- Student enrollment in various programmes
- Recruitment of faculty
- Development of curriculum
- Examination process and certification for award of degree for programmes
- Maintaining discipline through “Board of Residence and Discipline.”

The Academic Council usually controls student enrollment through the offices of the Dean of Faculties under the guidelines setup. The details of the selection process of students vary with different public universities. These details include setting qualification requirement for applicants, admission test requirements, test schedules, verification of identity and qualification requirements, etc. Usually strict confidentiality is maintained in preparation of question papers, marking of answer scripts, preserving identity of examinees and examiners etc.

Usually the recruitment of faculty members is based on the qualification requirements set up by the Academic Council. For the public universities it is mandatory to make public announcement for vacant post(s) and make selection through a Selection Board prescribed by the University Statutes.

The respective departments through the Board of Studies (in some universities known as Board of Advanced Studies), which in some universities includes external members, usually initiate curriculum for a new programme or modification of an old programme. Once the Board of Studies approves a curriculum it is vetted by the respect Faculty and finally by the Academic Council before the curriculum can enter into a programme.

The quality and relevance of question papers are monitored through a “Question Moderation Committee” for the programme usually approved by the Academic Council. Each public university in Bangladesh has an office of the Controller or Registrar of Examination, which maintains records of transcripts of all registered students and graduates.

There are hardly any external methods of quality assurance and quality enhancement in public universities in Bangladesh. It is also to be noted that no assessment of quality of the teaching and learning process is followed by public universities. Teaching quality assessment of the faculty members is not made through students’ assessment in any of the public universities. Some private universities have a semblance of faculty evaluation with no significant impact on teaching quality. Therefore, instituting some form of external assessment and quality review system is long overdue.

Though the selections in public universities are supposed to be made on the basis of merit, there are numerous cases where political consideration got precedence over relative merit.

Curriculum Development

The authorities that deal with the curriculum are the Curriculum and Syllabus Committee of the department; the respective faculty, the academic council and the syndicate. The

department curriculum committee consists of all the teachers of the department and external members (one or two) from outside the university. Usually the curriculum and syllabus committee meets once every year to redesign or revise the curriculum. After the curriculum and syllabus committee of the department considers the curriculum, it goes to the Faculty meeting which sends it to the academic council of the university for approval from where it is passed on to the syndicate for final approval. The syndicate usually approves academic council decisions; otherwise, it needs to send them back to the academic council with its observation for reconsideration. The academic council may or may not agree with the syndicate observation and its decision is final in this respect.

Examination: Assessment/Grading

Students are assessed through in-course and final examinations. However, a variety of assessment procedures are followed in different universities and even within a university. Usually there are 2/3 in-course examinations. Similarly, the final examination is also split into 2/3 examinations. The final result is cumulative. The other type that is followed is annual final examination at the end of one academic year with several in-course examinations. Both number and letter grades are used to award the final grade.

Usually the success rate in the examination is high, close to 95 to 97 percent. It has been seen that the number of students getting a first class is increasing and number of those getting third class is decreasing. An overwhelming proportion of students get second class.

In examining the answer scripts, a double examiner system is followed—one from the concerned department and the second one usually from another university or in some limited cases, from within the department. The average of the two sets of marks is taken for assessment. In case the difference between the marks given by the two examiners is more than 20 percent the answer script goes to a third examiner and the average of the two marks closer to each other is taken for final assessment.

Two examiners set questions—internal and external—which are then moderated in a meeting of the examination committee (a separate committee for examination), which includes one external member. Usually, a set of previous year's question paper and the syllabus are supplied to the question setters with the idea that repetition of questions (set in the previous year) is avoided. Students are also required to appear before an examination committee of four, which includes one external member. However there is no system of internal auditing in student grading.

Review of the examination system reveals that:

- a. in most cases it takes a long time in the publication of the final results
- b. at least 60 to 70% of the students answer the same questions
- c. most of the answers are more or less from the same source and follows the same pattern. It thus becomes difficult to distinguish one answer from the other, the product becoming more or less identical; and
- d. a good number of questions are repeated every second year.

Research and Quality Education

Research is considered to be an integral part of teaching and scholarship at the higher education institutions and is directly related to quality. In Bangladesh, the higher education institutions show a less than satisfactory track record in research and extension work. There is a strong realization on the part of educators, educational policy planners, teachers and various professional groups that in the global and national contexts, institutions that perform poorly in research will not be able to get into the knowledge society of today. A denial of such entry will reflect adversely not only on the production and dissemination of new knowledge, but also on the goals of national and human development. Research activities in higher educational institutions are severely constrained by a number of factors:

- *Inadequate financial support.* The public higher education institutions in Bangladesh are funded by the government through the University Grants Commission. The funding is perennially less than the institutions' requirement. Consequently, the institutions can only allocate a small amount for Research and Development. In some universities, it is less than 1%.
- *Lack of priority in deciding areas of research.* In many higher education institutions, research is not emphasized. This happens because of a lack of clear policies. Sometimes, it is because of internal politics in institutions which allows academics closer to the authority to get a share of the meagre resources for research that may suit their particular field, but which may deprive important research in other areas.
- *Lack of facilities.* This is an area that is showing a decline in proportionate terms (the demand vs supply; expansion of quality vs achievement of quality, for example). Facilities such as laboratories, equipment, libraries, journals etc. are always in short supply. Archival facilities are also lacking in almost all higher education institutions. There is also a corresponding absence of these facilities at the national level, compelling many of the talented young academics to go abroad.
- *Lack of industry and corporate support in research,* which plays a very important role in research in areas of business, science and technology, is absent in Bangladesh. Similarly, liaison between the government and non-government think tanks, which also contributes substantially to research in developing countries, is largely missing.
- Some teachers are not interested in research as they believe their job is protected. *Promotion rules* are also to be blamed. In public universities, a unique system of promotion exists, which is commonly called 'restructuring.' The system is largely concerned with years of service and administrative work and other extra academic activities and only partially with research. As a result, teachers publish only a certain number of articles in a given period of time, and get the promotion. Once one becomes a professor, there is no compulsion or incentive to publish.

- *Lack of incentive for research* and good research journals. In the higher education institutions in Bangladesh, from the initial appointment to promotions, beyond the customary article count, there is no incentive for research and publication. Excepting a few, journals are also not of international standard. The review process is done mostly in a perfunctory manner and the anonymity of authors is not always maintained. A look at the research articles and findings of research published in the various university journals, and books published by the universities and outside publishers will reveal many shortcomings. Besides, articles etc. published are in very low proportion to the number of faculty.
- Frequent elections engage teachers in electioneering and political rivalry which adversely affects quality and research.

As such for most of the private universities, research is a personal concern of the faculty members. Universities neither encourage nor discourage the faculty members. Most of the universities have no research grants for the faculty.

University governance and quality education

Along with the more prominent criteria of quality assurance, such as input/admission/recruitment criteria, output criteria; curriculum, workforce, budgetary and efficiency criteria, there are few other areas in higher education where performance is directly related to quality. These include governance, transparency, ethics and humanities and quality sustainability. It is difficult to measure performance and quality in these areas, but in many universities in the world, a continued emphasis in these areas has led to noticeable quality shifts that have contributed to a sustained quality culture. It is difficult in if not impossible to calculate achievement in these fields from the “value added” output each area may yield if the institution has the effort and desire to achieve quality. However these areas of critical assessment are usually neglected in Bangladesh. Some of these factors are not even considered to be critical to quality assurance of education. A review of the university annual reports also reveal that universities often have no clear vision, objectives or mission, governance, administration, or leadership.

Private universities also suffer from some serious governance concerns:

- Leadership (i.e., vice-chancellor, Board of Governors etc.) is often a matter of the financiers’/sponsors’ choice. Many of these universities have no concern for scholarship. VCs are sometimes non-academic persons with no experience of tertiary level teaching.
- Most universities have a stated “mission,” “motto” or “vision,” but these usually remain on paper.
- Accountability and transparency are not as expected.

6. Quality Education: Response of Government of Bangladesh

Considering the seriousness of the problems of higher education quality, the University Grants Commission of Bangladesh has initiated a rigorous process of stocktaking of quality of education in public and private universities. The Higher Education Strategy paper prepared by the UGC has therefore identified some of the major strategic issues and areas of concern that need to be addressed or resolved to enhance the quality and standard of education. These are:

- a. A right balance of government involvement in funding with appropriate share of GDP allocated to higher education;
- b. bridging the funding gap between what government can afford and what an effective system costs;
- c. enhancing and ensuring quality and equity of higher education;
- d. strengthening the research capacity of universities; and
- e. improving the governance of the higher education system.

The Strategy recognized that a vision for higher education in Bangladesh must reflect the aspirations of the people, reiterating that it must be of the highest quality and at the same time globally competitive. The higher education strategy therefore emphasized five core values:

1. Higher education must be assured of quality in all respects.
2. Universities should be committed to equal opportunity.
3. Greater attention has to be paid to fostering closer links between higher education and the world of work.
4. Universities should also foster national and international collaboration and cooperation to attain global standards and the advancement of knowledge.
5. Finally, attempts should be made to enlighten the students with knowledge and skills, educate people with moral values, and make them responsible citizens with the ability to compete with the job market nationally and globally.

Based on the assumptions and analytical premise mentioned above, the proposed Higher Education Strategy emphasized the following strategic approach to enhance the quality, standard and effectiveness of higher education in Bangladesh.

The Higher Education strategy						
Core focus				Supportive enabling initiatives/ activities		
Expansion	Quality of programmes and teachers	Relevance (with appropriate focus on science education) and equity	Quality Research	Better system of governance and management in the universities	Emphasis on ICT Facilities and support for teachers	Increased funding

7. Way forward

In order to ensure quality education it is imperative to stress on the conditionality for developing a well-defined mechanism for assessing quality and setting quality assurance

standards for higher education system in Bangladesh. A nationally and internationally acceptable exercise in setting up quality and standards begins with setting up an accreditation process. A typical accreditation system for an institution of higher learning aims at:

- setting a level of performance, integrity and quality that ensures continued support from the stakeholders and the society at large
- allowing learners to take advantage of a structured programme of learning or training through which they can claim a nationally (and internationally) respected certification
- ensuring the quality of procedures and outcomes of a programme that can be measured against set standards
- ensuring public accountability of institutions and programmes and makes them worthy of public confidence

In order to attain and sustain nationally and internationally acceptable quality of education, it is perhaps the call of the hour to set an autonomous quality assurance body. This may be in the shape of an *Accreditation Council* or Board. The terms of reference, functioning, structure, organogram, funding, management and administration and other matters should be discussed in public forums before finalizing the institutional shape. The proposed council should be assigned to: a. undertaking formal accreditation reviews, promoting internal quality enhancement and quality improvement in universities; b. carrying out external audits of the self assessments and self reviews of quality that universities would be expected to carry out themselves.

However the full-fledged operation of an *Accreditation Council* (AC) would demand some preparatory time for the universities. Before the AC gets into action, the universities should be given a time plan, strategic direction, expected quality standards, and procedure and indicators to be followed and used by in the assessment process. With the active support from the AC, the respective universities should also be encouraged to introduce self-assessment systems to strengthen the quality of their programmes.

It is important to note that an accreditation council may work to expected levels of efficiency and outcome only if it is made *autonomous* and kept free from any government as well as political control. The government through the Ministry of Education, should only play the role of facilitator, and provide necessary funding for smooth running of the council; the rest would depend on the autonomous structure and leadership of the body.

The governance processes of the public universities appear to be one of the most critical areas of quality of education. The overall *governance and leadership* of the higher education institutions thus needs to be carefully reviewed and assessed. Governance structure should reflect broad based representation from faculty and other stakeholders. Academic leadership should be periodically evaluated. A system of check and balance should be introduced, so that

under-performing leadership may be replaced. Political interference in the public universities by the government and the political parties must be stopped.

For greater ***accountability and transparency***, universities should have full fledged interactive web page. All decisions and minutes of selected working bodies should be posted there.

In all universities, an office of ***Academic Ombudsman*** could be created to address students and staff grievances and investigating any wrong doing (ranging from academic, moral and political) of the students, teachers and staff.

Each University must prepare a strategic plan for their ***academic and professional staff development*** with appropriate provisions for funding. There should be a consistent attempt to enhance teaching quality in all the higher education institutions. This will involve coordinated action in: a. continuous exposure of teachers to the latest in pedagogical and methodological developments; b. combining research and teaching in such a manner that the teachers' research in their respective areas can be best used for effective teaching.

Introduction of incentives and reward. Measures taken for retaining and developing quality teachers/researchers could include: a. provisions for *annual research awards* for teachers and researchers; b. providing *academic and logistic support* like IT facilities, recent books and journals and better working conditions.

The universities should prepare a continuous ***quality assessment training*** scheme for younger and newly recruited academic and research staff.

Quality education at higher level must not be seen in isolation. A broad-based comprehensive drive has to be taken to ***enhance quality in the primary and secondary education***, as backward linkages of higher education.

References

- BANBEIS (2002) Pocket Book on Educational Statistics, Publication No. 352, Dhaka, November.
- BANBEIS (2002) Statistical Profile on Education in Bangladesh 2001, Publication No. 350, Dhaka, November.
- Delors, J. (1996). *Learning: The treasure within*. Paris: UNESCO.
- Eaton, Judith S., An Overview of U.S. Accreditation: CHEA, Council for Higher Education Accreditation.
- Fielden, John, CHEMS Consulting, UK : Models for Institutional Autonomy and Governance.
- Hayward, Fred M., Consultant, The World Bank: Academic Program Reviews: Quality Improvement and Assurance at the Institutional level, July 2005.
- Monirul Hoque (et,al) *Final Report of the Quality Group*, report prepared for the Draft Strategic Plan for Higher Education In Bangladesh, University Grants Commission, Sept 2006.
- SouthAsia Enterprise Development Facility (SEDF), Private University and College School Survey: September 2003 and Institution Visits: September/October 2003, Dhaka.
- University Grants Commission (UGC) of Bangladesh, Annual Report: 1997-2004, Dhaka.
- University Grants Commission (UGC) of Bangladesh, The High Powered Committee Report on the Private Universities, Dhaka.
- University Grants Commission, Strategic Plan for Higher Education in Bangladesh , (Final Report May 2007)
- World Bank (1994) Bangladesh, Higher Education: Lessons of Experience.
- World Bank (2000) Bangladesh: Education Sector Review, Volumes I-III, The University Press Limited, Dhaka.