

QUALITY ASSURANCE IN TERTIARY EDUCATION – BANGLADESH EXPERIENCE

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I. Introduction.

Bangladesh ranks among one of the lowest rungs of global economy. It is a small country with an ever increasing population huddling, scrambling for existence within its limited space and resources. Most of the world does not have proper information about the country. However, the same teeming population can also be a strength and activity providing unlimited manpower for harnessing the natural resources of the country comprising of abundant fresh water, fertile soil, natural gas, minerals and mild weather. The country awaits an educated and motivated awareness and effort to utilize these resources to remove the odds of fortune, eradicate poverty, uplift moral standards and suppress social evils in order to pull the country out of its abysmal situation. All this can be achieved with the help of education which can unlock the door to flood the country with rising sunlight.

Education is of vital importance for the development of the country. Bangladesh, being a developing country, education deserves a high priority. The government has already adopted measures in this direction through a mass-oriented universal system of education, establishing free and subsidized compulsory education in the lower levels. The output of which has been a large in surge of high school graduates, most of whom could not be absorbed either in existing public institutions of higher education or provided with employment within the country. If a small percentage managed to get admission abroad, it meant a larger cut in the country's forex and a brain drain from the land.

From the above consideration, it was found necessary to enact laws to allow and recognize the establishment of institutions of higher learning sponsored by private enterprise in order to accommodate at least a percentage of high school graduates. In the total education system, higher education, has a special significance being the producers of leaders of social activities, trade, industry, politics, legal systems, health services, etc. thus, higher education, which was previously considered in Bangladesh as a privilege of the fortunate few, now came to be regarded as a basic imperative/absolute need for the prosperity, development and stability of the country.

Realizing that a large number of students were being deprived of higher education, the government has rightly provided a legal framework commonly referred to as the Private University Act (PUA) of 1992 and its subsequent amendments of 1998 was passed to supplement the work and ease the pressure of public universities. The modern world of science and technology which public universities could not provide ample opportunities in all the need-related disciplines due to fund constraints, the private universities could

provide and offer courses which are guided by the market related phenomena. The higher education in the private sector can reduce the financial burden of the government. The private higher education institutions can help maintain academic schedules and avoid session jams. Examination results, attendance, class participation and evaluation of students are ensured and monitored properly.

There are now 54 private universities, majority are in Dhaka, with an estimated student population of 100,000, offering courses in various fields of specialization, Business, Engineering, Science, Medicine, Arts, Social Sciences. The student intake is increasing yearly by more than 20%. All private universities in Bangladesh are legally required to abide by the provisions of the PUA. Reportedly, a new Private University Act 2005 is awaiting to be passed in the Parliament to replace the 1992 Act.

II. Present Status

In the absence of an independent body to evaluate the performance of the private universities, the University Grants Commission of Bangladesh (UGC) has been mandated by the PUA to work on behalf of the government as the only supervising and monitoring authority in the country. In a very limited sense, it is also an “approving” authority in the country because without its recommendation, the Ministry of Education does not accord permission to establish a private university. Besides, all new academic programs of a private university have to be approved by the UGC. Their approval legitimizes its operations, in some sense, approval is taken for accreditation. This is not the accreditation we are interested in. The UGC-Bangladesh works more as an approving authority than an accrediting agency. We may refer to the accreditation that is recognized by the University Grants Commission in India which is the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), European Quality Improvement System (EQUIS) or the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), all autonomous institution.

In Bangladesh, the UGC’s approval facilitates standard setting and benchmarking. The UGC assesses proposals submitted and makes recommendations to the Ministry of Education. It also approves proposals submitted by private universities to extend their academic programs. It also sets minimum qualifications of the teachers. It supervises and monitors the degree of compliance by the universities to the conditions imposed by the PUA. This is a mechanism to ensure the minimum level of standard in terms of legal requirements. But this is not enough. The difference between approval and accreditation should be noted. Approval is compulsory, accreditation under discussion is voluntary and it’s directly linked with the total quality management. The process of quality assurance goes beyond legal requirements. What UGC does is an attempt to ensure that a private university complies with the provisions of the PUA for its operations, which is not the objective of an accrediting agency nor the norms of quality assurance. It goes deeper and beyond, it is an internally built-in mechanism at the institution level that pushes continuously for the improvement of quality and excellence.

There is no national private agency in Bangladesh that is well equipped to accredit universities. However, there are several professional organizations that function in a limited sense, like private accrediting agencies, the Bangladesh Medical and Dental Council (BMDC), Institute of Engineers in Bangladesh (IEB), the Institute of Architects in Bangladesh (IAB). The memberships in these associations enhance the market value and image of the doctors, engineers and architects individually. Private medical/dental institutions, in addition to government approval a certification from the BMDC is needed to get a wider access to the market. Similarly, the engineering and architecture programs offered by the private universities need to be accredited by the IAB and the IEB. The RAJUK, a government agency which gives building and construction permits, does not approve any building plan designed by an architect who is a graduate of an institution not accredited by the IAB. In 2003, the IEB formed the Board of Accreditation of Engineering and Technical Education (BAETE) to oversee the growth and quality of engineering and technical education in the country. They accord accreditation to program level, not to the institution as a whole. However, these bodies have not yet achieved the status of an accrediting body.

In its original charter the UGC was not envisaged as an accrediting body. The assessing and ranking of academic programs or institutions can be carried out by the UGC, theoretically. But they are not clearly mandated to do this. In addition, they are not well equipped to undertake this responsibility. If the UGC will be mandated to function as an accrediting agency, it has to undergo substantial organizational and functional restructuring. A better option is to create a new and a separate private accrediting organization, like the NAAC in India.

There had been several attempts in the past to establish a quality assurance agency or an accrediting council. The UGC and the Ministry of Education of the country, just recently has prepared its proposal for the establishment of an Accreditation Council for Private Universities of Bangladesh (ACPUB).

III. Proposed Accreditation Council for Private Universities of Bangladesh (ACPUB)

The Proposed Accreditation Council for Private Universities of Bangladesh will be established under an Act to be enacted by the government this year. The draft of the proposal has been disseminated to the authority of all private universities. The Council is likely to be mandated to advise to the UGC and the Ministry of Education on the degree of compliance to the provisions of the PUA. The Council will provide a legal framework to establish an institutionalized monitoring system that will ensure quality and standards of education of these institutions by: memberships shall be compulsory for all private universities, motivating the institutions to undertake periodic self assessment and reviews of their academic program, requiring them for an evaluation of their program offerings by an external inspection team to be arranged by the Council, amongst others. It may also rank the universities, based on its overall performance.

The legal identity and credibility of the Council must first be established. The structure and composition of the different committees must be selected objectively, and with impartiality. In the organizational structure of the proposed ACPUB, there will be a General Council, an Executive Committee, a number of program committees, and a peer review team to review applications for accreditation for either the program or for the institutions. The members of the different committees are expected to voluntarily give their time and effort. Duties and responsibilities are both technical and exhaustive.

The General Council shall have 33 members including the Chairperson having representations from all stakeholders, Vice Chancellors from private (6) and public (3) universities, the UGC (3), the Ministry of Education (2), academicians (3) and equivalent organizations/bodies dealing with accreditation and quality assurance in higher education in other countries and regions. The General Council will be responsible for formulation of policy, frame statutes, laws and bylaws, establishing the critically important mechanism of auditing and assessing the performance, either by institution or by academic programs against a permanent parameter/benchmark already established and ranking the institution/program accordingly.

The Executive Committee shall have a chairperson and 8 members from the General Council. This Committee will be responsible for the appointing the Peer Review Team, approving of applications for accreditation, reviewing and approving reports of the Inspection team and arranging the dissemination of the results of the accreditation.

There shall be an Accreditation and Recognition Committee, Peer Review Committee which will oversee the assessment of the different academic programs. Based on the recommendations of these committees, a member may be graded according to the degree and demonstration of compliance with specified criteria (not yet published).

The initial funding for the ACPUB shall be an endowment fund of USD 720,000.00 from the government. Other sources shall be from fees from membership, applications for accreditation of programs or funds from within Bangladesh and outside which the ACPUB shall be authorized to raise.

IV. Recommendation

The private universities themselves (VC's of the top performing universities) can take initiatives to form a national accreditation agency which will frame a quality assurance system in the higher education institutions in the country. There are several organizations which can be used as model and can be developed, e.g. AACSB, NAAC, EQUIS. The initiators must take steps to acquire capacity to build itself as a private accrediting agency by getting technical support from renowned accrediting/quality assurance agencies, training a team of volunteer experts who will be qualified to assess institutions/programs. They must present to the academic community in the country their own vision, mission and set of criteria they want to use for accreditation.

A private initiated quality assurance system have the potential to promote improvement in the higher education institutions and programs in ways that are linked not only to acquire competencies or employment of graduates, but also to more efficient and transparent operations of the institution itself and the its programs. Assessment can also be effective when they help to supply data and information for strategic planning purposes. Many parameters can be described, verified, validated and exposed. The method and scope of dissemination of the findings is also an essential piece to our understanding of good practice and effectiveness.

Although agencies around the world share many common methodologies, they often differ in important ways: the level of government involvement, assessment tools, judgment, level and method of dissemination, benefits/sanctions, linkage to various funding and policy decisions. But there is a tendency toward an international model that includes self-assessment, external peer review and dissemination of findings.

It is of imperative importance that the private initiated agency to gain legitimacy, and to acquire necessary credibility. This will possibly accredit only private universities in the country. Their vision and mission will indicate whether the universities will be required by law to apply for accreditation or seeking accreditation will be voluntary. They must design its organizational and staffing structure. The experiences of reputed regional accrediting agencies indicate that to keep this agency operating smoothly, finances stand out as one of the major obstacles. Sources of funding must be sorted out first. It maybe noted that the initiators may seek help from donor agencies and establish channels of cooperation from similar agencies with a view of using their experiences. This will help facilitate the process of developing and establishing a private initiated accrediting/quality assurance agency.

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