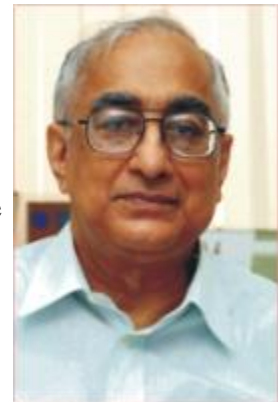


“At BRAC University, we try to provide broad based education” - Professor Jamilur Reza Choudhury

Professor Jamilur Reza Choudhury, Vice Chancellor of BRAC University, has many years of experience as a teacher beginning his career with BUET. Besides being an acclaimed academician he is also a successful administrator, and a visionary of repute. He has incorporated many of his ideas and visions in the development of BRAC University as an institute worth the name amidst dozens of private universities. He is also widely popular among the students and colleagues for his amiable personality and graceful poise. In a recent interview, he spoke with Shahnoor Wahid of The Daily Star on issues relating to the state of higher education in Bangladesh, and quality of higher education being offered at various private universities including BRAC.

At the very outset the conversation centred on the burning question of quality control in our private universities. Dr. Choudhury said that in most countries there are regulatory mechanisms to control the quality of higher education. In case of professional degrees, these are accredited by the relevant professional societies or independent bodies. Under WTO there is one component called Gats (General Agreement on Trade & Services). One objective of this is to ensure mobility of professionals and acceptance of professional degrees awarded in one country by another country. One prerequisite of this is that every country must have a credible accreditation system, which must be non-government. He further said that Bangladesh has taken the initiative already in this regard. A board of accreditation and engineering and technical education has been formed. So all degrees related to engineering being offered in Bangladesh would have to be accredited by BAETE. If one is a member of the Washington Accord and if a degree is accredited by BAETE then it will automatically be recognised by all signatories of the accord, which includes most of the developed countries.



This relates to all professional degrees like medical degrees, law etc., but what about the general subjects? In reply, Dr. Chowdhury said that most countries have accreditation bodies. The ministry of education of Bangladesh has also taken the initiative to form an accreditation body. At one point it was said that it would cover all universities. But then a decision was taken to the effect that at this stage it might not be prudent to include public universities. So, now the draft of the act named Accreditation Council for Private Universities in Bangladesh has been approved by the ministry and sent to the Prime Minister's Office. Dr. Choudhury however expressed his doubt as to whether there would be time left for this government to take it to parliament. He further elaborated that the accreditation process includes self assessment, then a visit to see the physical facilities in the universities, laboratory facilities, course curriculum, how questions are

being set, how the examination scripts are being graded and so on. All the documents have to be made available to the visiting team. Then once all the criteria are met then the degrees might be accredited. The institute may also be accredited. The results of the whole exercise may be given in the website, so that any person, students or guardians will be able to understand the status of the university. Dr. Choudhury expressed concern that unless these steps were taken there would be risk that some universities might get tempted to start selling degrees.

We asked him some questions on private university education system, course curriculum, quality of teachers and on holistic education.

The excerpts are given below:

Star Campus (SC): There seems to be a similar set of subjects being offered by most private universities in Bangladesh. What is the scope for expansion and diversification of courses in these universities?

Jamilur Reza Choudhury (JRC): Yes, most of the private universities are offering programmes with a narrow range of discipline, viz. Business Administration and ICT related subjects. This is in response to the market needs and employment opportunities at home and abroad, as perceived by prospective students and their guardians. However, this is not a desirable situation. Universities must offer a wider choice of programmes covering a broader spectrum of discipline. I am happy that at BRAC University, we have been able to gradually expand into a number of areas including Architecture, English, Law, Physics, Public Health and Development Studies. There is considerable scope for further expansion and diversification. However, some of the science and engineering related subjects require a lot of investment, particularly in laboratory equipments.

SC: Do you think inclusion of subjects like philosophy and contemporary world history and literature would ensure holistic education for the students?

JRC: If we look at some of the best universities of the world, we find that the students are offered a choice of subjects which include not only their major field of study but also from other discipline, in fact in some well known universities in USA, the students are asked to follow a common curriculum for the first 2 years of their 4-year study and have to select a major area only in their third year. The objective is to expose them to a holistic education. The major constraint is the time available for completion of undergraduate degree, 4 years in most countries. This restricts the number of subjects a students would be required to complete. At BRAC University, we try to provide broad based education. All students are required to complete a number of subjects related to “General Education,” viz. Bangladesh Studies, Ethics, Social Sciences, Natural Science (drawn from areas outside their major field of study).

SC: As most of our students will look for opportunities to go abroad for higher studies or work, do you feel the curriculum they are following in BU is adequate for increasing their competence?

JRC: I do not think most of the students who are graduating in Bangladesh would have to seek opportunities for employment or higher studies outside the country. However, with the on-going trend of globalisation, our movement of professionals from one country to another is becoming

increasingly important for all graduates to have exposure to topics which will enable them to deal with diverse problems related to the international arena. Communication in English is one of the most important skills required of any graduate whether s/he likes to work in Bangladesh or in other countries. These are areas where we are devoting a lot of attention at BRAC University. In order to improve the competence of our students in English, we have introduced a special compulsory programme including a one-semester residential course outside Dhaka city.

SC: Are you satisfied with the standard of teaching at Brac ? Are there scopes for their further training and orientation with modern methods of teaching?

JRC: Attracting and retaining experienced faculty members is one of the major challenges that we face. In view of the shortage of senior teachers, we try to recruit teachers who have very good academic credentials and we encourage them to go for PhD studies in well-known universities round the world. We expect that in a few years time this problem will be partially solved. However, this depends on the prevailing socio-economic conditions in Bangladesh. We have devoted a lot of effort in training the faculty members on modern techniques of teaching methodology. This includes workshops conducted by successful teachers from some of the best-known universities like Harvard and Columbia.

SC: What new faculties are going to be added in BRAC University in the next one year?

JRC: We have the plan to introduce the programmes on Biotechnology, Civil Engineering and Pharmacy.

SC: We are always talking about erosion of values in society. The present day young students are our future. How can good values be inserted in the curriculum so that the erosion can be stopped to a great extent?

JRC: Taking into consideration the gradual erosion of values in our society, we have introduced some courses related to ethics and professional practices, which are compulsory for all our students. We are trying to develop new courses related to ethics, so that these relate more to our day to day problems.

SC: On a personal level, how would you compare today's bright students with the bright students of the sixties?

JRC: I think the bright students now-a-days are better informed compared to their peers in the 1960s. From their childhood, these students have much better opportunities acquiring knowledge about global developments in science, technology, politics through electronic media and internet.

However, excepting a few well-known schools and colleges mostly located in the urban areas, the quality of education has gone down over the years. The students are becoming increasingly dependent on “note learning” and becoming “coaching center” oriented. This has a detrimental effect on their ability to innovate and solve problems, which they may face in practical life.