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For a better education

Mamun Rashid

A university should have a well-stocked library, modern computer centres hooked up with the fastest Internet connection, and well-equipped research facilities



We need to keep improving our standards of education.

Former University Grants Commission Chairman Professor Nazrul Islam said: “The poor quality higher education being offered in some private universities is more dangerous than anthrax.” He added: “Anthrax can cause harm to both animals and human beings, but the poor quality of education in our universities can kill the prospects of the nation.”

I could not help but agree with Professor Islam somewhat. Who wants poor quality education? However, I am engaged with several top-tier private universities myself, so don't dismiss my opinion as something coming from “the other side.”

We are aware of the fact that our public universities are constrained by capacity and -- among other issues -- there are session jams and bad politics. Private universities have created many average and above-average students, therefore, the emergence of the private sector in higher education was graciously welcomed by the business community as well as those who could afford it. Parents are glad to have more alternatives, while students are excited to find flexible and dynamic course offerings more in tune with the real world.

We have a premier business school in Bangladesh -- IBA. North South, IUB, Brac, and East West have also joined this league. We have also recently started hearing about AIUB, ULAB, and State University Bangladesh. NSU is struggling to maintain its teaching standards and core resources, while IUB trustees are working hard to attract good teachers. It's the same case with Brac University and East West University.

However, most of these institutions are producing above-average graduates, especially business graduates. Brac's architecture department, NSU's economics department, IUB's environmental science department, and Ahsanullah University's computer science department have also earned a good reputation.

Yes, there are issues with regards to tuition fees, or teachers getting involved with internal politics. But these universities' continuous focus on English and public-speaking, along with their emphasis on IT literacy, is helping students get ready for the world. Teachers coming in from public universities may be disappointed with the students' level of motivation at their new workplaces, but it is a great thing that students' eyes are opening.

They are learning how to learn, and are acquiring the skills necessary to acquire skills. They are adopting the necessary mindset. Most such students may not be reading any English newspapers or watching BBC. Some are, in fact, failing to correctly read even one page in English, but the commercialisation of our labour force is underway.

They want a good life and to earn enough money to enable them to explore better opportunities. In every class I teach, I ask my students to read at least one English newspaper report, let them talk about social business, gender equality, the lives of Ratan Tata or the Ambanis. Some students falter, many of them even freak out.

But believe me, many of them ultimately want to be like Steve Jobs, Ratan Tata, or Bill Gates. That is a big change. We are creating space for a broader community, one beyond public universities or any known territory. The number of female students is increasing in MBA or EMBA classes. They don't mind attending classes even at 10pm.

The situation is changing, however. Domestic corporate houses are popping up at a faster pace than ever. Private universities have to form the right strategies in order to prepare their candidates for any adverse situation down the line. The challenges are multi-faceted.

First of all, the ratio of core staff to the total number of students in private universities is too small, putting immense pressure on the core team to maintain usual business. The dean is often

bogged down with administrative duties due to the unavailability of a suitable designate. When does he have the time to get any sort of strategic planning done?

A shortage of quality teachers is a chronic problem that I see schools face day in and day out. Teachers sometimes have no hands-on experience with the corporate world, giving preferences to textbook-oriented, inward-looking faculty members. The teacher-sitting-in-a-chair-and-dictating-the-same-class-notes archetype cannot be how an institution for higher studies functions anymore.

The inputs and outputs of any private university worth its salt are the students. In order to reach a break-even point, financially, some universities are forced to take in as many students as it can every semester. When the focus shifts to quantity rather than quality, there is no worse signal for the entire education sector. Some of these universities don't even hold any entrance exams.

An administrative cadre must be formed to free-up time for thinking people. Private universities should put a transparent feedback process in effect for evaluating teachers. This should be shared with the teachers concerned, and their views must be taken into cognisance. It is in the universities' best interest that they try their best to keep the best faculties on-board. The alumni should have strong associations amongst themselves, and work for the benefit of their alma mater.

A university should have a well-stocked library, modern computer centres hooked up with the fastest Internet connection, and well-equipped research facilities as a bare minimum. Going forward, the universities that want to distinguish themselves must look to attracting quality teachers and researchers from abroad, and, in addition to teaching, must encourage them to do research on both Bangladeshi and global issues.

We should also have an accreditation council in effect soon. Good money will drive bad money out of circulation, and ensure survival of the fittest.