

We have a serious lack of academic vision, leadership: BRAC U VC

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Bangladesh has a poor learning environment where lectures, memorisation, passing examinations and getting certificates are still the norm, observes the vice chancellor of BRAC university.

Professor Syed Saad Andaleeb also says quality is a major challenge in Bangladeshi higher education institutions.

“Not much is being done to enhance student and faculty creativity via problem-solving skills, collaborative learning, cognitive and emotional skills, incubation and innovation, social immersion and internships,” he told Prothom Alo in an exclusive interview recently.

He added, "We need to develop a culture of cascading academic leadership - leadership at multiple levels rather than hierarchical control. I think we have a serious lack of academic vision and leadership."

A former professor of marketing at Pennsylvania State University, USA, professor Andaleeb said Bangladeshi universities are nowhere near global academic standards.

"Our research activities do not even match Asian standards," said the author of a number of books and many widely cited articles.

He feels that Bangladeshi universities “must” improve as Asia is being talked about as “the next highest education superpower”. “There must be a desire at the highest levels to see world-class universities in Bangladesh,” he insisted.

“Many students who scored GPA 5 in Secondary School Certificate and Higher Secondary School Certificate do not always pass our simple admission tests. This says a lot about our deficient supply chain: the secondary and higher secondary education system,” he said.

The full text of the interview is given below:

Prothom Alo: There is a popular perception that quality of education in the country has declined. Based on the intake of students you get at your Bachelor’s programmes, what is your observation about the standard of education at secondary and higher levels?

Syed Saad Andaleeb: Whether quality has declined or not is a moot question. This ought to be regularly and empirically assessed by the relevant authorities. There will

also be quality variations by a) levels (e.g., primary, secondary and higher education) b) by location or region c) by income category of students d) by public versus private universities and e) the quality, capacity and motivations of our teachers.

There are islands of excellence. However, indicators suggest that quality challenges are high in Bangladesh's higher education institutions (HEIs).

I can also share with you that many students who scored GPA 5 in Secondary School Certificate and Higher Secondary School Certificate exams do not always pass our simple admission tests. This tells a lot about our deficient supply chain: the secondary and higher secondary education system.

We have a poor learning environment where lectures, memorisation, passing exams and getting certificates is still the norm; not much is being done to enhance student and faculty creativity via problem-solving skills, collaborative learning, cognitive and emotional skills, incubation and innovation, social immersion and internships.

Prothom Alo: How do you look at the standard of our institutions that provide higher education? How far are they in line with global standards?

Syed Saad Andaleeb: We are certainly not there alongside higher education institutions that have attained global standards. Reaching such standards will be daunting as quality is a journey. Globally reputed institutions are constantly improving their quality and standards. Continuous quality improvement is their mantra. Thus, catching up will be challenging. If we are to be in line with global standards, we must chart a course on a) where do we want to be on quality (which must be defined in measurable terms) b) how can/should we get there c) with what resources commitments d) in what time frame and e) with what indicators to monitor.

The employability of our graduating students is also not good. According to different statistics, roughly 50 per cent are unemployed, while \$5 billion worth of expertise is imported. The general comments of our employers about our graduates are also not favourable.

Quality standards are also reflected in demand: only a small number of international students are enrolled in a small percentage of HEIs in Bangladesh.

To attain global standards in higher education, the most important thing we need is high quality faculty who are trained in research and/or teaching and high-quality students from the supply chain. We also need high-quality academic administration, exciting programmes and curricula, substantial financial resources, autonomy of the HEIs within a strategic framework, benchmarking with target institutions, and strict accreditation standards.

Prothom Alo: Another contentious issue regarding the quality of higher education at private universities, as some blame, is the lack of adequate infrastructure while others point their finger at the faculty. Will you please share your observation on how far the private universities meet the demands of the students?

Syed Saad Andaleeb: Both infrastructure and faculty need continuous improvement. We also need to introduce state-of-the-art technology, tap into a good supply of quality

students entering the universities, fill up the missing middle (i.e., lack of assistant and associate professors), introduce modern academic governance, build pedagogical/andragogical sophistication, and shun the culture of providing (even selling) certificates (with focus on memorisation). We need to foster a culture of learning and problem-solving and a broadened world-view (not mere technical know-how). One important matter I must note sadly is that the poor quality that is being offered by many HEIs is not being rejected by society; rather there is demand for poor education with the number of private universities at 102 and growing. Do parents know what they are paying for? I think students' and parents' expectations are not up to the mark that allows for mediocrity and in some cases deception and debilitation of the mind.

The faculty at our private (and public) universities in general are poorly trained in research and teaching; hence, they add little value to the educational experience. We must move from a culture of memorisation and regurgitation to a thinking-based, problem-solving and analytically oriented, and application-based education system to truly reflect our goal of building human assets.

Prothom Alo: None of the Bangladeshi universities is placed in top spots globally. Why is that?

Syed Saad Andaleeb: I think the first task is to recognise that we are in the Fourth Industrial Revolution where knowledge is paramount: knowledge that is useful (not outdated) is the only source of sustained growth. How many of our HEIs produce knowledge that is recognised globally as relevant? Academic management systems are also deeply deficient. We need to better understand what top-notch institutions do and emulate best practices. Gaining a top spot also involves hard work, sustained over the long periods, by teams who take ownership. We need to develop a culture of cascading leadership. Most importantly, the quality of our teachers and students must be much better to vie for a top spot. The facilities and infrastructure of our universities also need to be vastly improved.

Prothom Alo: As the role of the universities is supposed to produce knowledge, do you think Bangladeshi universities are playing this role?

Syed Saad Andaleeb: I think this is our Achilles Heel! We are not at par with Asian standards. The biggest challenge is our teachers and researchers whose research skills are generally deficient. Another important factor is that our libraries and access to global knowledge systems are weak. Also, we seriously lack funding for research. Moreover, our teachers and students are not interested in research for lack of rewards, recognition and incentives that are sparse and often politicised.

I also think that some faculties are resistant as they find research activities difficult. This is exacerbated by our system where it is possible for teachers to advance in their careers without doing research. Another important thing is: we do not produce quality peer-reviewed journals.

Plagiarism is also a big issue in our research environment. This is very serious! To address plagiarism I propose i) making it mandatory that all faculty publications be placed online for public scrutiny ii) shutting down sources that supply plagiarised materials iii) having periodic evaluations of a random sample of research papers by experts to determine levels of plagiarism iv) running turn-it-in software of all published

research v) and monitoring research courses to see how they are being taught, especially at the M.Phil and PhD levels.

I would like to make one thing clear- not every faculty member will be a good researcher. Some will be very good teachers. They must be nurtured. Other will be good at creating knowledge. They must be encouraged. Perhaps our universities ought to develop two tracks for faculty --research and teaching.

Prothom Alo: It is heard that students do not have to read textbooks for some courses but can still complete the courses by memorising excerpts from some books photocopied for years. What is your take about the curriculum and teaching method of our higher educational institutions?

Syed Saad Andaleeb: I don't think students always have to read textbooks. In some fields the textbooks are outdated by the time they come out. Many higher education institutions teach via current journals or materials supported by an able library. If you give students textbooks they will still memorise, because it is the culture. For teachers student evaluation is easy because students either have regurgitated all items on the list or not.

Students will learn more from interesting teaching methods, e.g., creative projects, group discussions, problem-solving, critical essays, role playing, case analysis, debates, introspection, research and much more. But teachers must be trained in these practices and be willing to engage differently with students.

Prothom Alo: Would you mind sharing your judgement about the quality of our university faculties?

Syed Saad Andaleeb: There are excellent faculty members who are dedicated and have genuine interest in the development of their students. They are engaging, challenging, demanding, hard-working and creative. Some do very good research. Then there are others who are irregular, offer boring classes with just lectures and PowerPoint, are unfriendly and unwilling to take questions, have poor assessment system, are unfair in grading, and often disorganised and unprepared. Their research profile is also very weak (poor citation rates, low-quality journal publications, etc.) You can actually find the answer on your own. Just go to a random set of departments and ask for the names of the good teachers: the students will give you a list (they are usually not off the mark). Then find out the proportion of good teachers to the total number of teachers-- that will tell you the story!

Also teachers must familiarise themselves on new pedagogies that- focus on "reaching" students instead of teaching. They must also be aware of learning outcomes and rubrics to assess student learning and shun memorisation, lists, definitions, etc. -- these are readily available in the books. It is better to see if students can understand, analyse, synthesise, and apply knowledge to solve problems. I also feel the systems of mid-term and final exams are relics of the past. Faculty must be given more freedom to be innovative in assessing formative and summative learning.

I think the real issues are commitment and ownership. One cannot be a good teacher if (s)he treats it as a mere job. But this is also a two-way street: the universities must also be committed to support and develop the best qualities in their teachers.

Prothom Alo: Poor salary offered to teachers is another issue and as a result, some institutions fail to get qualified teachers. What's your thinking about pay for teachers?

Syed Saad Andaleeb: I cannot deny that some institutions pay less than others: it is usually a function of their revenue base. Many less recognised private universities are unable to pay what the better reputed ones are able to pay. Thus, there is variation. To build good institutions, you need good teachers who must be attracted with decent pay and benefit package.

An interesting thing is to look at turnover data -- i.e., how many teachers are leaving because salary is low. If they are worth more than what they earn, surely, they will move on to other workplaces.

Should there be a standardised national pay-scale for private university teachers as some suggest? I firmly believe that top-caliber faculty can negotiate their salaries, especially in private universities.

Prothom Alo: What are some of your recommendations for making the Bangladeshi higher educational institutions world class?

Syed Saad Andaleeb: Some of my ideas have already been expressed. There must also be a desire at the highest levels to see world-class universities taking root in Bangladesh. Asia is being talked about as "the next highest education superpower." Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong have begun the competition for research supremacy with policy drives designed to "promote world-class universities" backed with serious funding. India's finance minister announced that an "enabling regulatory architecture will be provided to 10 public and 10 private institutions to emerge as world-class teaching and research institutions." Similarly, the Malaysian government upgraded four institutions into research universities and one university into an apex university.

We must have a similar vision and a framework at the apex. The ministry, at the next level, must translate this into building competent human resources.

Fundamentally, top-notch universities must deliver two things: top quality teaching and stellar research.

I also think there should be categories of universities - pure research universities (producing the nations' MAs, MScs, MPhils, and PhDs and high-quality research), blended universities (balancing quality teaching and research) and pure teaching universities (with solid pedagogical foundations).

We should have good training facility for education administration, a curriculum advisory board, an accreditation body, a national research council, creative financing to support

world-class endeavours, and a data infrastructure to track agreed-upon performance indicators.

To be really world-class, our universities must do three things very well - create knowledge, disseminate knowledge, and use knowledge to shape society. Partnerships and exchanges with reputed universities abroad will also be beneficial.