Some Issues of Higher Education in Bangladesh: Analysis of Demand, Problems and Trends

Fakhrul Islam*

ABSTRACT

The paper examines the trend of, demand for, problems and issues of contemporary higher education in Bangladesh using historical-empirical method. The expansion of enrolment in higher educational institutions shows that there is demand for higher education. But enrolment pattern reflects interdisciplinary imbalance in favour of liberal arts and social sciences than pure science, agricultural science and technical areas. The issues and problems relating to access to schooling, quality of education versus quantitative expansion, confusion over priorities and functions, relation between educational activities and economic growth have to be resolved to make higher education efficient and relevant in the context of Bangladesh.

1. INTRODUCTION

Education, as we all know, is a key to development, for a nation as well as for an individual. Higher education is indispensable for development to a higher level. By the term higher education, in Bangladesh we normally understand education at the tertiary level beyond the higher secondary level. It would therefore include education provided in the universities and under-graduate and post-graduate colleges.

Many scholarly essays, books and treaties have been written in the area of knowledge, education and learning within the context of a university. The continuing debate about the role of a university is rich and revealing. For example, V.H.H in his book named ‘The Universities’ said, “the Universities were undoubtedly one of most significant creation of medieval world. Their Graduates helped to shape its thoughts to create a mode of intellectual discipline, to lay the foundation for a scientific culture, to interpret its laws and its customs and to administer it governments”. Another educationist named Robert Wolf in his book The Ideal of the University discussed four models for ideal university: (a) the university as a sanctuary of scholarship, (b) the university as a training camp for professions, (c) the university as a social service centre, and (d) the university as an assembly line for established ‘men and women’.

The main function of the university is to create knowledge and to disseminate knowledge. Within the context of a university all activities in which the faculty and students engage themselves are expected to create and disseminate knowledge. The university bears the responsibility of moving the society forward by addressing the pressing problems for the society and producing the positive thinkers, business and political leaders and intelligent workers. In this age of globalisation, technological advancement and competition, there is no alternative to the creation of a knowledge-based society which is only possible through universities of very high quality.

There is a fair consensus that a system of higher education is of strategic importance in national development of any country. For
this purpose expansion of higher education is a genuine claim. Such a goal, as Myrdal says, is important in order to bring about a development of the whole national community, rather than merely enclaves in a stagnant economy. (Myrdal: 1998). But in recent times what has been happening in higher education is a frustrating scene. The political and sociological forces are making a compelling demand for quantitative growth of education. These forces are less concerned about simultaneous change in traditional objectives of higher education, improvement in management and efficiency in performances.

The colleges and universities have been allowed to expand to accommodate the rising number of students. The entry conditions are often relaxed to bring about as many pupils as possible into the mainstream of education. In such a race to achieve quantitative targets, the quality of schooling has been sacrificed to a great extent. The issue of ‘number versus quality’ has begun to cause serious strain on our traditional system. The rationale for egalitarian ideology is self-defeating. Statistical charts showing enrolment in different areas and disciplines of our higher educational institutions give us some satisfaction, but these do not provide a thoughtful solution to the problem of improving the quality and efficiency of education.

2. HISTORY OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN BANGLADESH

Higher education in the modern concept began in the Bangladesh region with the establishment of the University of Calcutta in 1857 and especially the University of Dhaka in 1921. However, higher education of an international character had much older history, in the form of the Buddhist monasteries of Pundranagar (now Mohasthan), Paharpur and Mainamati some 2000-1400 years ago. We also know that one of the first universities of the world, Nalanda, was located not far from Bangladesh and that the Acharya of Nalanda was a Bangali, named Shilabhadra, in the 7th century. We in Bangladesh today, therefore, are proud inheritors of a great tradition of higher education or university. There has, however, been a discontinuity in that tradition.

The establishment of the University of Dhaka in 1921 had a profound impact on the development of education in Bangladesh (East Bengal) during the British period, especially for the Muslims who had unfortunately fallen behind their Hindu compatriots. Dhaka remained the only university in the region for the rest of the British period.

Five more universities were however established during the Pakistan period, between 1953 and 1970. They were all in the public sector. Since the liberation of the country, there has been a remarkable growth in both the number of universities and in the number of university students. A new development in university education has been the establishment of private universities since 1992.

3. HIGHER EDUCATION TODAY

At present there are 32 public universities in the country, the setting up of a new university at Gopalganj, has also been approved, thus raising the number of public universities to 33.

There are currently as many as 51 private universities in the country, most of which were very hurriedly and carelessly approved and established during the last regime. Although some of these universities have already achieved a fairly large student population; only a few of the older ones can claim quality.

Among the functioning 29 public universities, 28 are campus-based, while the National University (NU) is an affiliated university, with over 1876 colleges located all over the country. The Bangladesh Open University (BOU) based on the Distance Learning mode also has a country-wide coverage through its Regional Resource Centres and Branches.

The 28 campus-based public universities together had 153,249 students in 2008, while the NU had 855,744 and the BOU 232,353 students. The 51 private universities had 124,267 students at that time (Table-1).
4. ENROLMENT TREND AND DEMAND FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

Enrolment is one of the major indicators of determining demand for education. There are nearly eighteen hundred and seventy six (1876) degree colleges in the country. A large number of students of these colleges study humanities or liberal arts subjects. Data from UGC Annual Report source show that nearly 64% of the students appearing in degree examination in 2007 were from arts and humanities group. Only a small number of 13% and 18% appeared in science and commerce subjects respectively (UGC:2007).

Enrolment pattern in four general universities shows a slight change in student’s choice of study areas. It may be observed from Table-1 that nearly one-fourth of the total students were enrolled in liberal arts courses at honours and masters level during the year 2005-2006. In these universities the number of students studying science and technical subjects was the highest among all areas of studies. Other areas of studies in order of preference were social science, commerce and law (BANBEIS:2006).

There is sex-wise difference in selection of areas of studies. The priority area of enrolment for male students was science, while for female it was liberal arts and social science.

The technical and professional universities and a small number of technical and professional institutions offer courses in various areas of technical and professional education.

The Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET) enrolled 5,377 students during the session 2005-2006 (Table-3). Among all departments, civil engineering enrolled the largest number of students. Other departments in priority order of enrolment were electrical and mechanical engineering and architecture (BBS: 2006).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Universities</th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public Universities (28)</td>
<td>153,249</td>
<td>11.22</td>
<td>6523</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National University (1)</td>
<td>855,744</td>
<td>62.68</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh Open University (1)</td>
<td>232,359</td>
<td>17.01</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Universities (51)</td>
<td>124,267*</td>
<td>09.09</td>
<td>6690 (3666 F.T)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1,365,619</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: UGC Annual Report 2007

* Excluding National University and Bangladesh Open University

Note: The four general universities are Dhaka, Chittagong, Rajshahi and Jahangirnagar

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Faculties</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Liberal Arts</td>
<td>10,260</td>
<td>6,434</td>
<td>16,694</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Science</td>
<td>9,860</td>
<td>4,560</td>
<td>14,420</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law</td>
<td>1,050</td>
<td>575</td>
<td>1,625</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commerce</td>
<td>9,554</td>
<td>2,347</td>
<td>11,901</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>15,889</td>
<td>6,575</td>
<td>22,464</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>46,613</td>
<td>20,491</td>
<td>67,104</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: UGC Annual Report 2007

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Departments</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Civil</td>
<td>1,296</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>1,478</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanical</td>
<td>875</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>1,025</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industrial Production</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electrical</td>
<td>1,072</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>1,232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chemical</td>
<td>347</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>439</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metallurgical</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: UGC Annual Report 2007

Table-3: Enrolment in the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET) (2005-2006)
### Table 4: Enrolment in the Bangladesh Agricultural University (BAU) (2005-2006)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Faculties</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>1,422</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>1,639</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veterinary Science</td>
<td>390</td>
<td>184</td>
<td>574</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animal Husbandry</td>
<td>272</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>452</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology</td>
<td>321</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>411</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agricultural Engineering and Technology</td>
<td>305</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>332</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fisheries</td>
<td>410</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>559</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>3,120 (78.65)</strong></td>
<td><strong>847 (21.35)</strong></td>
<td><strong>3,967 (100.00)</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** UGC Annual Report 2007

Out of the total enrolment only 14.38% of the students of BUET were female and most of them were enrolled in civil engineering and architecture, while majority of the male students were enrolled in civil, electrical and mechanical engineering.

In Bangladesh Agriculture University (BAU), 3,258 students were enrolled in the session of 2005-2006 and the largest number of them were in the faculty of agriculture (Table-3). In this university only (21.35%) of students were female and out of this number many of them were enrolled in the faculty of agriculture. (UGC:2007).

### 5. IMBALANCE IN ENROLMENT

The enrolment pattern in degree colleges and general universities as discussed above shows the predominance of liberal arts. The causes of this may be traced back in the second level of education. In many of the secondary schools, particularly those located in rural areas, there is a shortage of qualified and trained teachers of Science, English and Mathematics. Most of the schools do not have well-equipped laboratories. This situation compels many boys and girls to study humanities at the secondary level. Therefore, we lose a good number of prospective students who could have demonstrated their aptitude to study in science and technical subjects in higher education.

Enrolment in higher education reflects interdisciplinary imbalance in favour of humanities, social sciences and general science whereas agricultural science and other technical areas which are related to the critical need of economic development have small number of students. One consequence of this is high incidence of unemployment among many of the graduates in liberal arts and general subjects. Ultimately it affects gradual development of the nation (Blaugh: 1993). To rectify this there is need for desired shift to science and technology which have to be built on a similar shift in the second level of education. But how to make such a shift successful? Higher education is expensive in terms of public sector investment. Per student recurring cost in higher education is very high. But science and technological education costs more resource than education in general universities. Therefore, the pace of progress towards a better balance will also be dependent on the availability of the required financial resources. Again resource investment in education without simultaneous national planning to absorb them in their respective occupation will cause surplus output in these areas which will prove more costly in terms of financial resource than a comparable surplus in liberal arts or social science. (Niblett: 1990).

Annually a huge number of students pass the HSC examination. The number of successful candidates in this examination generally exceeds two lakhs (BANBEIS:2006). Out of them quite a large
number seek admission in the institutions of higher education. In spite of limited capacity there was expansion of enrolment at the higher level of education in recent years. The existing trend of large number of candidates seeking admission for higher education and growth in enrolment imply that there is demand for higher education. Now it is the task of the planners, policy makers, the Government and the private bodies to devise alternative avenues so that the rising demand for higher education can be met through a variety of courses at various levels according to the choices and needs of the students. The establishment of 32 public and 51 private universities may address the problem of demand of higher education to some extent.

6. PROBLEMS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

There are many problems in higher education in Bangladesh. We will touch upon some of the major areas.

**Access:** The growth of enrolment at the secondary level and large number of outputs from HSC examination put a pressure for admission in the higher educational institutions. But due to limitation of capacity, annually thirty-five thousand successful HSC examinees may be enrolled in these institutions. In 2008, over 275,000 students passed H.S.C., but only less than 100,000 could be admitted in the universities and most among the rest got admitted into the National University colleges or dropped out. For the remaining vast number, the need is to open alternative choices such as vocational education, correspondence course, open university programmes, departmental training by employing agencies, and the like, in order to conserve resources and maintain the academic standard. This will involve a careful and detailed planning, a massive programme of technical and vocational education and a larger allocation of funds.

**Quality:** Assurance of quality, rather than scoring just quantity, is a critical issue in higher education. It is a general perception and a very widely circulated view that the quality of higher education (and for that matter of education in general) in Bangladesh is low and that the standard has fallen over time. The benchmark of comparison may be international or even national when the temporal reference is considered. Quality of higher education is usually measured by employability of the products. The existing pattern of unemployment and under-employment of university graduates implies that the system is not working efficiently and effectively.

Parental emphasis on measuring higher education through results of examination as an indicator for qualitative excellence, inadequate relationship between research and classroom teaching, unsuitable educational environment, want of educational implements, unsatisfactory teacher-student ratios are actual impediments in the way of acquiring the right type of higher education.

The demand for higher education also affects the quality of education. Lack of wide avenues for studying varieties of subjects and opportunities for studying in various streams put a great pressure upon the universities and colleges. This pressure for admission along with existing inadequate facilities, resources, personnel, library, laboratory facilities and accommodation significantly affect the quality of higher education.

**Governance:** The greatest challenge to higher education in Bangladesh today is definitely in establishing the principles of good governance, which includes, authority, autonomy, transparency, accountability, participation, responsiveness, coordination, efficiency, capacity building, equity and sustainability. Satisfying demands of all these indicators is not at all easy, but efforts must be made to such an end.

The problems of governance are quite different in the public and private university systems, but it can summarily be said that most of the universities in either system suffer from the problems of misgovernance. During the past, many public universities have been accused of serious administrative and financial irregularities, while many among the private universities have similarly been charged specially with lack of transparency, non-compliance of conditions set for them by UGC and the Ministry of Education.
The challenge, therefore, is to come up with governance systems which can ensure quality education at a reasonable cost, (both time-wise and money-wise). The fundamental purpose of higher education, which is to create knowledge and produce enlightened and skilled human resources, must be satisfied.

**Relevance:** One common criticism of higher education is that it is characterized by traditionalism without having any significant relevance to the national needs and problems of rural economy of the country. The output from seats of higher learning that could have made great impact on the economic life of the people by sparking off the green revolution is lacking.

The unemployment of huge products of education implies that it is not effective and relevant for their absorption in appropriate jobs. Higher education which consumes more money from public sector in per-student investment if not relevant, is a total waste. So the present pattern of higher education needs to be rectified through national planning, manpower requirements and educational relevancy.

**Efficiency:** The efficiency of higher education is proved by the usability of their products and their contribution to society. The contribution to efficiency of education system is also of the researchers, personnel and scholars working in the institutions. (Blaugh: 1998).

The outputs of higher education is one criterion for measuring efficiency. There is a large number of failure, nearly 52% in the degree examination. In the honours and masters level the percentage of pass is much higher than degree level. But among the successful outputs only the able students hope to enter into the profession which require high academic competency and professional skills. Another weakness of higher education is that universities and colleges have no follow up records of their graduates. The data on unemployment of graduates of universities and colleges which are currently available are scanty and sometimes contradictory. There is also lack of scientific tool for measuring efficiency (both of internal & external) of higher education.

Brain drain is another indicator of measuring efficiency of the education system. A large number of able students going abroad every year means that education system lacks adequate facilities for higher studies and research. In this way we lose many of the potential best products who could have greatly contributed to the development of economy and the society.

7. **CURRICULUM REFORM**

Modernization of curriculum and syllabus in the light of new knowledge is one of the essential tasks of any education system. The curriculum of higher education, particularly, should be regularly updated so that it can incorporate the contributions of modern knowledge and research and make its standard acceptable to the outside world. There were curricular reforms in Bangladesh in the past but no radical reform was so far done.

There are bottlenecks in the way of curricular reform. The composition of university bodies, their mode of functioning together with present system of examination, the organizational set up of departments in universities and colleges vitiate rational consideration of any reform. In spite of such problems there were curricular reforms but those were not preceded by careful research and not followed by orientation of teachers or the provision of needed physical facilities.

But the restructuring of curriculum has become imperative in view of rapid change in the contemporary society. High priority has to be accorded to thorough revision and reorganization of the existing curricula and courses both at the first degree and the postgraduate level. The most important and urgent reform needed in education is to transform it so as that it becomes related to life, needs and aspirations of the people and serves as an instrument of socio-economic development and the realization of national goals. For this purpose, work experience which would help to reduce the existing gap between the world of learning and the world of work should be introduced as an integral part of higher education. With
these general principles there is an immediate need for combining
the academic component of the courses with applied component
suited to the work experience
situation, especially in the rural areas.

Agriculture is vital to the life and progress of the country. Therefore, agricultural knowledge and skills should have a prominent place in the academic programme of higher education. Alongside there should be cooperation with the agricultural university and other user institutions in planning as well as running such new courses.

Post-graduate education and research assumes the highest significance for maintaining educational standard and for programme of development. The aim of education at this stage is to take a student to the threshold of new knowledge. It is essential that teachers and students at this stage are actively involved in the creation and dissemination of new knowledge and its techniques. Therefore, every institutions offering post-graduate studies should have competent staff to actively engage in research work and adequate research facilities.

Fundamental discoveries in science lead to technological advances while technology provides the scientists with sophisticated tools and instrument and enables them to make fundamental discoveries. As such it is necessary to see that the best talent in the country is harnessed for development of science and technology. It is also necessary to understand that while fostering knowledge of science and technology at the highest theoretical level there is growing need to spread it in rural areas and to develop technology relevant to the emerging national needs. Such a development would also demand an interaction between the institutions of higher learning and the productive processes and organs of the society.

The planning of new curriculum or reform of curriculum should be related to the quality of teachers. The teaching community must enrich themselves with the new development to improve their competencies and quality. At present there is little provision for further education of teachers. The teachers require exposure to various external influences within the country and abroad. In order to facilitate such an exposure, the universities should develop a multifaceted programme of faculty improvement on a regular basis such as encouraging professional conferences, participation of faculty member in such conference both in the country and outside, liaison with the industry, maintaining contact with national and international problems, inviting distinguished visitors for lecture, discussion and collaborating work, providing good library, reproduction facilities, encouraging faculty members to write text/reference books, encouraging exchange programme between similar institutions and organizations and developing suitable facility for documentation, abstracting, reference services for wider dissemination of information.

8. ISSUES AND TRENDS
Some emergent issues and trends of higher education deserve special attention in the context of future planning of education at this stage in present Bangladesh.

The objective of higher education demands a closed door education policy for a small number of intellectually motivated students who aspire for academic excellence. While the current sociological and political forces make a compelling demand on the system to inflate it quantitatively without affecting any fundamental change in its aims. As a result the colleges and universities have expanded to accommodate a bulk of unmotivated and ill-prepared students. Therefore, in the bid to achieve the quantitative target, the quality of schooling has been substantially sacrificed.

There is confusion over priorities and functions of higher education. The focus of education has shifted from cultural self-development to job accreditation. The dominant image of man now is of competition and exploitation. In such a climate of opinion, the important issue is identification, definition, protection of goals and values which make higher education an unique institution.

The question of improving the quality of higher education has been examined by various committees and commissions and their recommendations are also endorsed by the Government. But
implementation is difficult mainly due to obstacles in the existing institutions and attitudinal situation. Certainly it is comparatively easy to achieve the quantitative target with the help of monetary investment, yet the desired qualitative changes so urgently needed are difficult to achieve without transforming the quality of man and environment.

The relation between educational activity and economic growth has not been worked out efficiently either at the policy-making or at the implementation level. This is more truly represented in the economic growth rate and enrolment at the tertiary level. The economic growth rate is slightly over 5.5% while at higher education the growth rate of enrolment is nearly 7%. There has been naturally a constant increase in the number of educated unemployed and maladjustment between educational system and the socio-economic needs of the country. It is difficult for an economy with limited growth capacities to absorb the products of its system.

The unmanageable size of the higher educational institutions due to expansion of enrolment created management and administrative problems. Student population has increased ten times since 1972 whereas the number of universities increased from 6 to 23 in thirty five years period. This imbalance has inevitably caused strain on the efficiency of the management and principle organization.

Last but not the least, the vice of session jam to a great extent disrupts the academic life of the universities. The lengthening of academic life of the students beyond scheduled session consumes extra resources of the parents and the institutions. But the worst victim of the problem is the student community themselves. By the time they complete their studies, many of them become frustrated and lose vagour and energy. This also impairs their efficiency as worker. Besides, simultaneous operation of many sessions put great strain on the administration, management and facilities of the institution which ultimately affects the quality of higher education and community life of the students.

9. **CONCLUSION**

The goals of higher education and particularly the university education are to expand the frontier of knowledge, share knowledge and enable the society to enjoy the fruits of their intellectual pursuit. The discussion in the paper on demands for higher education, problems and issues show that there are constraints in the way of achieving the goals. Some of these constraints are within the system itself and some are the legacy of the past.

To address these, the Government has given serious thought to the reform of the education system. It has adopted several significant measures for improvement of national education policy from the primary to the tertiary level. The measures relating to the tertiary level deserves special mention. The establishment of the Open University, the enactment of Private University Act, the provision for private medical colleges and teachers’ training colleges are a breakthrough in the existing higher education system. One of the innovative ideas behind these measures is involving the private sector in the expansion and development of higher education side by side with the public sector. It is expected that the academic programmes of the new institutions along with those offered in the existing higher educational institutions will be able to partly meet the rising demands for higher education in Bangladesh. We are very much optimistic about the Strategic Plan for Higher Education in Bangladesh: 2006-2026 which is already prepared by the University Grants Commission of Bangladesh. Meanwhile, the Government of Bangladesh has approved the project named Higher Education Quality Enhancement Project (HEQEP) and the University Grants Commission of Bangladesh is the implementing agency of this project. If the project implements properly and effectively, the present scenario of higher education in Bangladesh will improve satisfactorily in respect of quality, demand, existing challenges and issues to keep pace with the globalised world.
REFERENCES:

9. The Financial Express, Dreaming of a World Class University in Bangladesh. 10 June 2008