

Private Universities: The Emerging Trend of Higher Education in Bangladesh

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Abstract

This paper analyses the emergence of private universities in Bangladesh, evaluates the current situation prevailing in the private education sector and identifies some of the major problems overshadowing this sector. This study, based on evaluation of secondary data, shows that private universities have played an undeniable role in providing higher education to the masses and are continuing to do so. At present there are 54 private universities in operation in Bangladesh and rigorous competition has continuously guided them towards providing quality education, in order to attract prospective students.

Keywords: Private University, Higher Education

Introduction

The concept of Private Universities is a fairly recent phenomenon from the context of the university education system in Bangladesh. Before the independence of Bangladesh and during the British era, the Rajshahi (1953), Bangladesh Agricultural University (1961), Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (1961), University of Chittagong (1966), and Jahangirnagar University (1970). Thirteen years after the independence of Bangladesh, an Islamic University was established in Kushtia-Jessore district in 1986. These were all either autonomous or Public universities and the idea of Non Government University did not emerge until the late 80's when many students were forced to go abroad to study for their higher education due to the limited intake capacity and subject matter availability of the then existing Public Universities. Most students went abroad to countries like India, Singapore, Malaysia, UK, USA, Australia etc.

It was reported that on average in a year, about 50-60,000 Bangladeshi students studied in different colleges, universities and institutes in India. Similarly, a significant number of the professors of public universities (mainly belonging to the disciplines of engineering, natural sciences, economics, and business) did not return to the country from the Western countries after completing their study leave (Alam, Haque & Siddique, 2007).

As a result, Bangladesh was losing skilled manpower and brilliant minds to foreign universities, and majority did not return back home due to better job prospects abroad matching their field of study. This human flight of capital, a phenomenon aptly termed "Brain Drain" rose

at an alarming rate during the late 80's and early 90's. As defined by Beine, Docquier and Rapoport (2003), the term "brain drain" designates the international transfer of resources in the form of human capital, i.e., the migration of relatively highly educated individuals from developing to developed countries. In the non-academic literature, the term may be used in a narrower sense, and relates more specifically to the migration of engineers, physicians, scientists or other very highly skilled professionals with university training.

The loss of human capital also led to the depletion of foreign currency reserve. Bulk of the foreign currency reserve was siphoned abroad during that period to support and finance the livelihood and education of Bangladeshi students studying in foreign universities. Facing such a bleak scenario, the need for the establishment of private universities became clearly evident. In 1992 the Government of Bangladesh passed the Private Universities Act (PUA) in parliament, which allowed the establishment of Private Universities to provide higher education to the masses and to provide degrees which are greater in demand in the current job market. This act was further amended in 1998 and recently on July 11th, 2010 the updated Private Universities Act 2010 received the approval of the parliament. At present there are 51 private universities in Bangladesh, with 3 more are in operation with court order. Most of them are operating in Dhaka, while some are operating in Chitagong and Sylhet divisions. 35 new private universities are currently awaiting approval.

1. Objective of the Study

The paper will try to highlight why private universities have become more popular in recent times compared to public universities and will explore remedial measures in the light of the problems and prospects of this sector.

2. Methodology of the study

The study will be based on available secondary data.

3. Higher Education system in Bangladesh

The tertiary sector of Bangladesh is funded and overseen by the University Grants Commission (UGC), established in 1973. One must complete 12 years of education to be enrolled at a university or college. In the past, higher education used to take place at polytechnic institutions. Currently, under the National University, around 18,000 affiliated colleges provide the tertiary education. BA (pass) education is offered by most of the colleges while only one-third of them offer B.A. (Honors) courses ("Country summary of higher education: IDB," 2007). It has been argued that colleges in rural areas fail to attract students because of poor education quality and outdated course curriculum.

At present there are 31 degree awarding public universities and 54 private universities. The public universities are financed almost entirely by the money of the public and autonomous entities. Private universities are not funded by the government and they need UGC's approval to start and approve course curricula but can award degree on their own, although they do not receive any funding from UGC. Public universities optimally use exams to determine admissions and set a minimal tuition fee. On the other hand, private institutions charge a much

higher tuition fee and often do not set admission exams and carries out student intake on the basis of secondary level academic performance. They are heavily taxed by the government despite being a not-for-profit organization.

4. Emergence of Private Universities

The Private Universities Act was passed in 1992 to discourage flight of students for higher education abroad. The public sector was unable to fund the creation of new universities or to expand their student intake capacity. Frequent closing of universities due to political turmoil also encouraged students to opt for admission abroad. As a direct result, government took the initiative to encourage the private sector to come forward to establish Non Government Universities.

Private universities in Bangladesh mostly follow the US based model semesters, credit hours etc, offering various degrees in popular subjects like business administration and computer sciences. They are more focused on offering market oriented courses which are understandably in higher demand amongst the student body. These universities have adopted the US system of GPA for grading and evaluation of student performance.

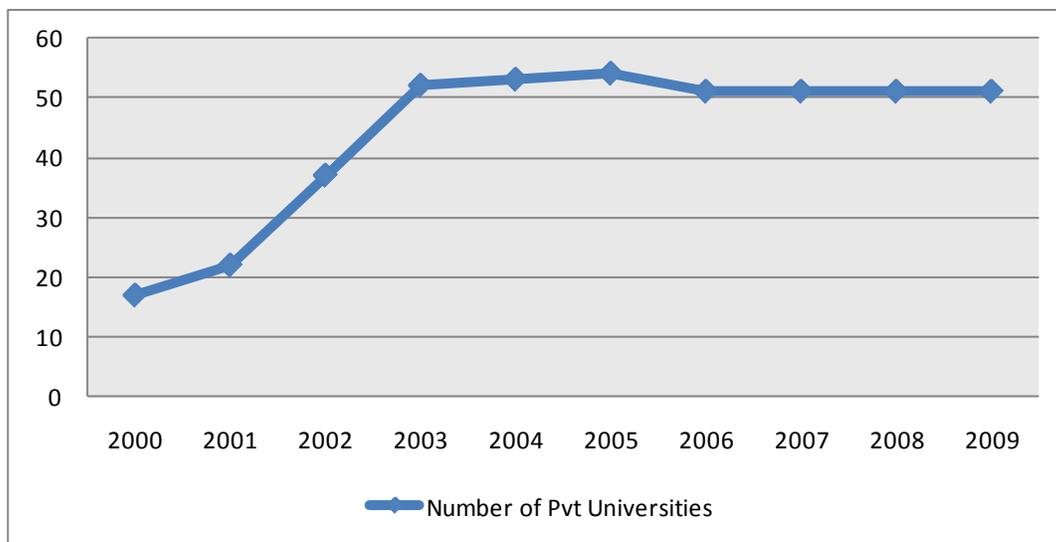


Figure 1: Number of Private Universities over the years

Source: Constructed by the authors on the basis of data from UGC Annual Reports.

The growth of private universities between the periods 2000 and 2009 is depicted in the graph shown above. In 2000 there were 17 private universities in existence but currently, 54 universities are in operation, which shows that the growth rate of private universities to be around a massive 200%. Even now, some new universities are awaiting approval from the government.

Every year, more and more students prefer private universities for their higher education due to a variety of reasons. The public education sector is riddled with session jams, favoritism

of educators towards students belonging to the ruling party, outdated course curricula, limited intake, unforeseen closures due to political/social turmoil, misuse of government fund, selection process of teachers heavily overshadowed by political interference, late publication of result, higher absenteeism rate of teachers etc. In recent years, the number of seats available for students in public universities have increased somewhat, but they are still highly inadequate. The number of students with GPA -5 in their HSC exceeds the number of available seats by a far greater number. Competition for admission in public universities is hence fierce and the unsuccessful applicants are quickly absorbed by the private sector.

In 2010 HSC and equivalent examinations, around 2,91,116 students scored between Grade Point Average 5 and 3.5 and they are eligible for admission in private and public universities that can accommodate around only 1,07,000 students. Of the total number, 28,671 students secured GPA 5 while 2, 62,445 students scored between GPA 3.5 and 5. Nearly 37,000 seats are available in public universities and 70,000 in private universities. In total, as many as 5, 33,369 students - 244,823 male and 244,823 female - passed HSC in 2010. Of the 37,000 seats in public universities, Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology has 885, Dhaka University has around 4,500 and Jahangirnagar University about 1,350 as shown by education ministry statistics. Public and private dental colleges are offering 910 seats, while nearly 1, 76,005 seats are available in 199 colleges offering honours courses and 1, 53,338 seats (pass course) in 1,474 colleges under the National University. (The Daily Star, 2010)

Year	No of Public Universities	Total Enrolled	Increase/Decrease as compared with previous year	% increase/Decrease
1998	9	67,145	-137	-0.20
1999	9	70,635	+3104	+4.62
2000	11	78,192	+7557	+10.69
2001	15	92,562	+14370	+18.37
2002	15	92,152	-410	-0.44
2003	19	1,04,736	+12584	+13.66
2004	19	1,12,327	+7591	+6.76
2005	19	1,16,397	+4070	+3.62
2006	23	1,53,249	+36452	+31.66
2007	27	13,99,843*	+9755	+6.36
2008	29	11,76,969	-22874	-15.92

*Figure includes number of students enrolled in HSC and SSC programs (1, 92,659) under Open University

Figure 2: Tabular representation of student increase in public universities

Source: UGC Annual Report 2009.

The above table shows the total enrollment of students in public universities between the periods 1998 to 2008. The increase/decrease in number of students enrolled as compared to previous year is shown both as absolute values and as percentages.

Year	No of Private Universities	Total Enrolled*	Increase/Decrease as compared with previous year	% increase/Decrease
2003	52	46,080	+11648	+34
2004	53	62,856	+16776	+36
2005	54	88,669	+25813	+41
2006	51	1,24,269	+35598	+40
2007	51	1,70,505	+86238	+37
2008	51	1,82,641	+12136	+07

*Figure excludes foreign students

Figure 3: Tabular representation of student increase in private universities

Source: UGC Annual Report 2009.

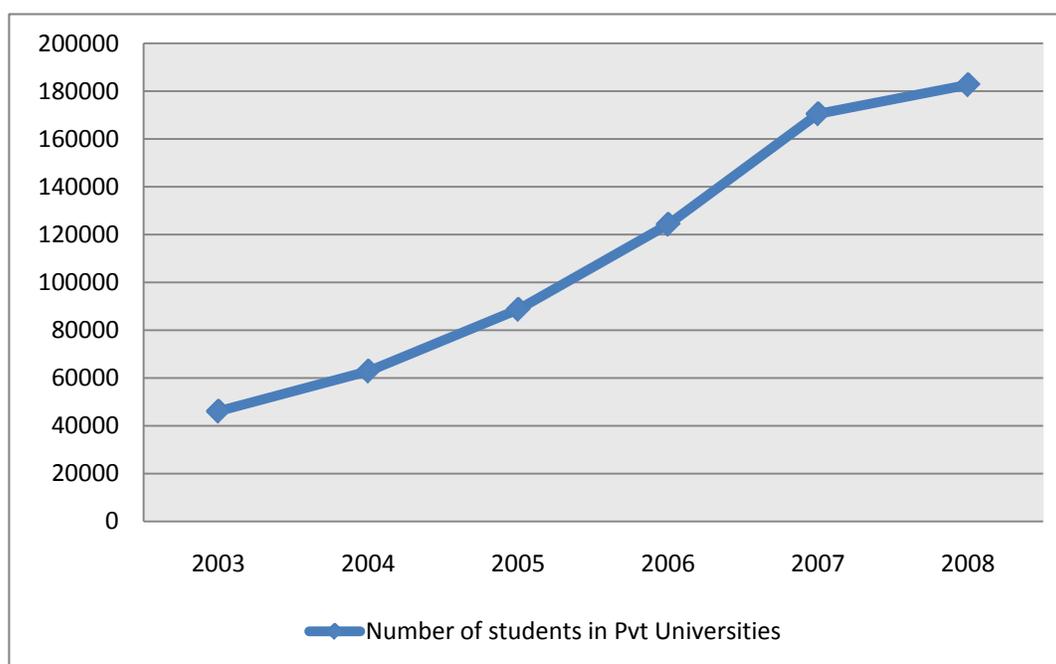


Figure 4: Number of students enrolled in Private Universities

Source: Constructed by the authors on the basis of data from UGC Annual Reports.

Figures 3 and 4 above shows the total number of students enrolled in private universities between the periods 2003 to 2008. Point by point increase in absolute and relative terms is shown in figure 3. According to figure 4, around 46,080 students were enrolled in private universities in the year 2003, while in 2008 the number stood at 1, 82,641. This shows a 296.35% increase in the rate of student enrollment during the periods 2003 to 2008. This massive growth clearly reflects the emergence of the private universities as an undeniable contributor to the education sector of Bangladesh.

5. Quality of education in Private Universities

Quality of education in private universities is deemed to be superior to that of public universities in recent years. Medium of education in private universities is in English and they are affiliated with foreign universities in greater number than private universities. Higher education at private universities has growing popularity because it means better paid employment with degrees. Most of the courses offered in private universities are related to business studies, with good job prospects and which are in high demand in the job market. These days, in the job market, graduates from private universities are preferred more than graduates from public universities, with the exception of IBA and Department of Finance, University of Dhaka.

54 private universities are competing in an intense competitive environment with regard to quality of education. Students of private universities, since they pay higher fees than students of the public sector, are more sensitive of their rights and they constantly demand better learning environment and well qualified teachers and staff. The quality of education in the public sector is deteriorating due to session jams, lack of teaching aids/seminars/workshops/study tours, late publication of results, outdated course curriculum, appointment of unqualified teachers based on political affiliation, frequent closure of universities due to student and political unrest, etc. In general, it takes a student around 5 years to complete a 4 year BBA. On contrast, students studying in private universities are graduating in time and they are entering the job market earlier and are paid higher salaries on average than students from public universities. Also, there is a growing trend for students who had completed their A' levels to choose private universities as their top priority choice as these institutions are free from the limitations that public universities suffer. Also, in public universities, per batch on average may have well above 100 to 200 students. Such a huge number makes it extremely difficult for teachers to give their full attention to all the students. In private universities, per batch may have around 30 to 50 students which creates a more cordial and participative classroom atmosphere and promotes learning. The educators can truly then employ his/her full faculties to help the students learn.

The figure depicted below shows the growth of teachers in both the public and private universities during the periods 2003 till 2008. It is clear from the bar graph that even though the number of teachers in the private education sector was below that of the public education sector in the earlier periods, in recent times the number of teachers employed by private universities is exceeding the number employed at public ones. This shows that the private universities are generating more employment over the years as compared to public universities.

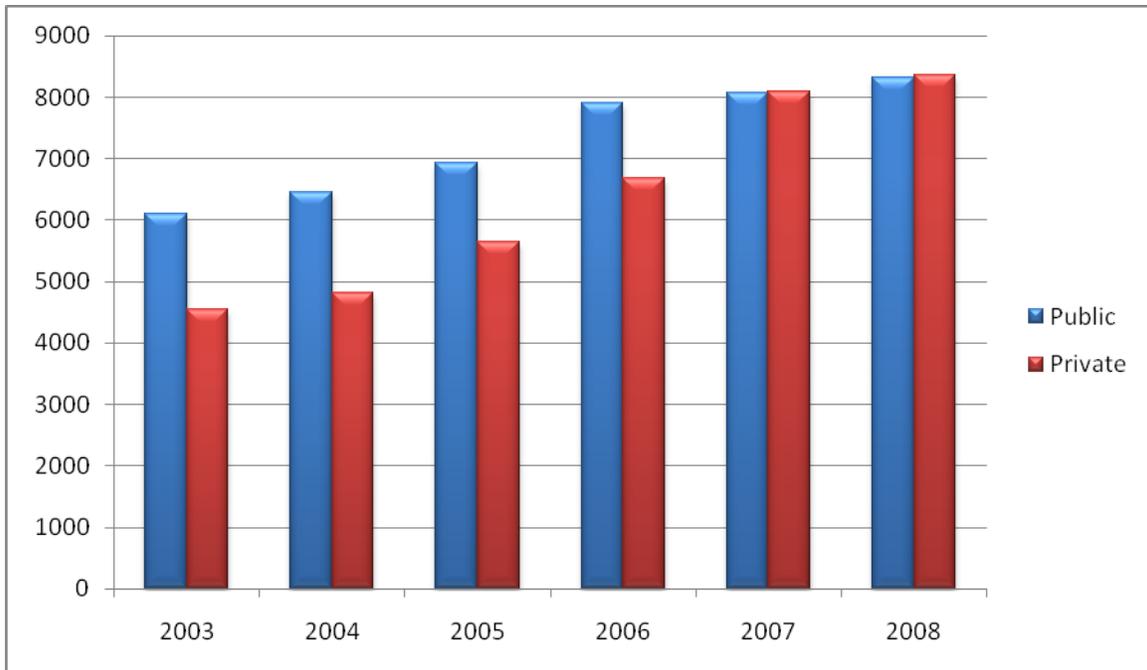


Figure 5: Number of teachers in Public and Private Universities

Source: Constructed by the authors on the basis of data from UGC Annual Reports.

A few years back private universities were criticized greatly for having more part time faculty than full time ones, but this trend has changed over the years. From figure 6 (shown below) we can clearly understand that over the periods 2003 to 2008, greater number of full time faculty is now being employed in private universities. In most private universities, to adhere to quality, full time faculty is being selected on the basis of their educational experience, publications, and academic performance. Educators with foreign degrees are often given preference.

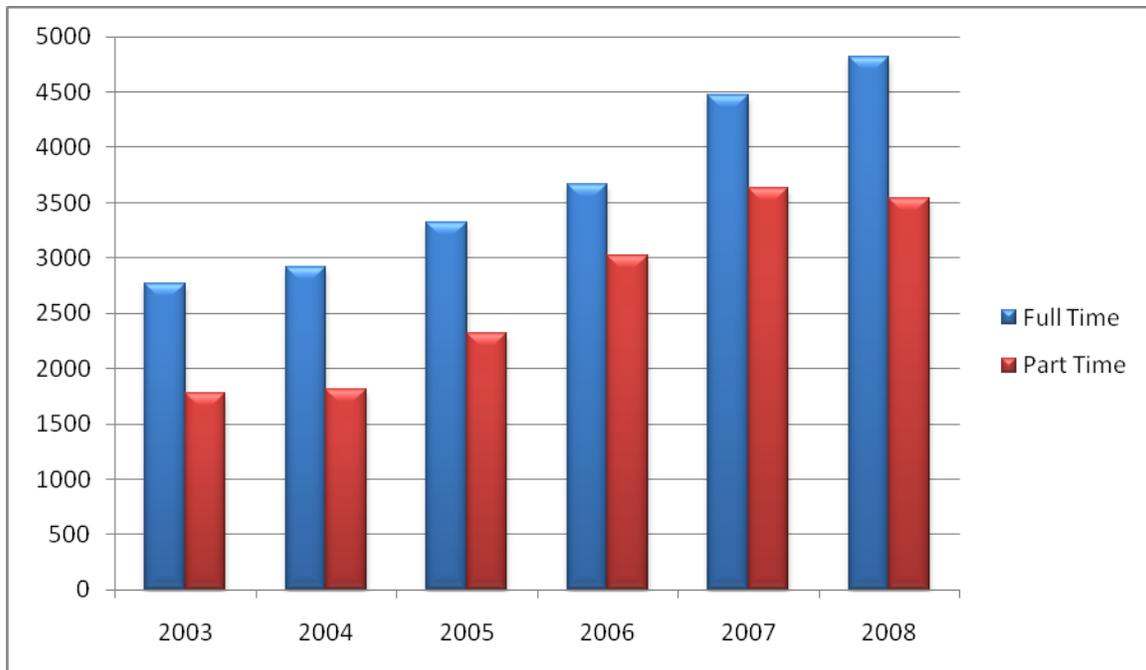


Figure 6: Faculty of Private Universities: Full time and Part time

Source: Constructed by the authors on the basis of data from UGC Annual Reports.

6. Problems of Private Universities

Private universities are criticized for their high cost and tuition fee structure and more serious allegations were brought to light regarding the awarding of degrees in exchange of money. This may be true in case of some of the universities but in general the scenario is different. UGC constantly monitors the activities of private universities and any allegations are immediately investigated, which discourages such dishonest practices. A goal of all contemporary universities is to earn a profit, or in fund accounting terms, a surplus of revenues over expenditures. The true distinction is that they do not dispense these profits in full to owners or shareholders, but reinvest these profits in institutional activities that supposedly serve the public interest. (Dill, 2005)

Private universities are compelled to design a high tuition fee structure due to various reasons. As mentioned before, there exists a competitive environment in the private university sector with regard to attracting prospective students. This competition compels the private universities to appoint well qualified teachers, often from the public education sector, at a much higher remuneration than what they receive from the public sector. Also, greater part of the fund accumulated from tuition fees is spent upon infrastructural development, namely providing well equipped laboratories and libraries, spacious and air conditioned classrooms, and also on arranging seminars and workshops, overseas tours and development programs, academic and non-academic services etc. It must be kept in mind that despite the tuition fee structure remaining high, the competitive environment has forced all universities to keep the tuition fees at an affordable rate with a hope to get more students and cope with the competition. It is logical that

the tuition fees will increase slightly every year because of increased cost of living and inflationary impacts on money and the economy. On the other hand, private universities are required to leave 6% of seats for free studentships for wards of freedom fighters and students from poor families. Many universities offer free tuition to meritorious students having GPA-5 in their HSC level.

Also, in light of the prevalent competition, students now have a greater choice regarding which university to choose and which subject to read. If one believes the cost structure to be too high for a particular university, he/she can simply choose another one. In the early 90's, there existed only around 17-20 private universities. But now, there exists 51 private universities and they are all competing both in terms of quality and price. Students are the lifeblood of a university. The more the number of students a university has, the faster it grows and prospers. It also must be kept in perspective that the better the good/commodity, the higher is its price. Same can be said true in the case of private sector education. The higher costs are also a guarantee for the students that once they graduate, they will receive adequate salaried jobs.

Another major problem is that most of the Private Universities established in Dhaka city do not have any campuses of their own. Most are operating in rented buildings, and it is not uncommon to see two different universities in the same building side by side. Students studying in private universities do not get to understand the true meaning of the word "Campus". It is clear that most private universities operating in Dhaka are unable to provide students with the ideal educational environment due to lack of own campus space. Dhaka, being a very small city, logically cannot accommodate all the private universities. There is a dearth of space available for purchase at the heart of the city and its peripheries. Understandably, private universities, being not-for-profit institutions, cannot afford to run their operations in distant or remote places as doing so would mean greater increase in costs as they then would have to arrange for accommodation and transport for both faculty and students. For this very reason, they are compelled to continue their operations in rented buildings. Popular consensus amongst students has also shown that they are unwilling to study at any campus located outside the capital, or at the outskirts.

Conclusion

From the above discussions, it is evident that Private Universities had played a major role in the higher education sector of Bangladesh over the last one and a half decades and are continuing to do so, although education is still deemed to be a social good in this country. This signals the success of pre-market economy in a rather controlled environment. However, the growth of the higher education sector would have been remarkably significant had there been congenial environment altogether. It is doubtful whether the new Private Universities Act 2010 will have positive impact on the smooth growth and functioning of the higher education sector.

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