

Protests at Public Univs: Academic activities severely hampered

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Students of Jahangirnagar University (JU) is holding a concert in front of its Vice Chancellor Farzana Islam's residence demanding her immediate removal on Thursday, November 7, 2019. Photo: Star

Mohiuddin Alamgir

Academic activities at several public universities have been thrown into disarray due to unrest over different issues, including allegations of the vice-chancellors' involvement in irregularities and

corruption.

With no immediate solution in sight, thousands of students of these universities could face disruptions in their academic calendar, leading to session jams.

Take the case of Jahangirnagar University.

Students and a section of teachers have been agitating on the campus since September 18, demanding the resignation of VC Prof Farzana Islam over her alleged involvement in corruption and mismanagement of a Tk 1,445-crore campus development project.

Academic activities were hit hard the day the demonstration began. The authorities on Tuesday shut down the university for an indefinite period. Most of the students have vacated their dormitories.

Prof Farzana denies her involvement in any graft or irregularities.

At Buet, students have been boycotting classes and tests over a month demanding punishment for the killers of Abrar Fahad. Abrar, a second-year student, was beaten to death by a group of Chhatra League men at a university dormitory between the night of October 6 and early hours of October 7.

The protesters said Abrar became a victim of BCL ragging that plagued the university halls mainly due to negligence from the Buet authorities, including VC Prof Saiful Islam.

At Pabna University of Science and Technology, students have been skipping classes since October 28, demanding the removal of the VC, Prof Rostom Ali, over allegations of graft and irregularities.

A few days earlier, an audio clip of an alleged conversation between the VC and a person seeking a job at the university went viral.

In the clip, the job seeker is heard telling the teacher to return Tk 8 lakh which he had given as bribe. The job seeker is also heard saying he did not pass the recruitment test.

Prof Rostom termed the clip fake. “A vested quarter is after my image. They are spreading falsehood,” he told reporters.

A group of Rajshahi University teachers, under the banner of “Teachers’ Society Against Corruption”, have been holding human chains on the campus every Monday and Thursday since October 3, demanding the removal of VC Prof M Abdus Sobhan and Pro-VC Prof Choudhury Zakaria on different charges.

The teachers are irked by the “Jai Hind” remark by the VC at a programme on September 26. They also alleged that the pro-VC took a bribe to recruit a teacher.

Prof Zakaria denies the allegation.

Khulna University of Engineering and Technology (Kuet) was closed for an indefinite period on November 1 after students of two dormitories clashed over a football match, leaving six injured.

Earlier, the authorities of Barishal University kept the university closed for 11 days since March 28 following student protests against the then VC SM Imamul Haque’s controversial comments.

The students started protesting on March 26 after they were allegedly excluded from the university's Independence Day programme. On the same day, VC Imamul Huq made a remark calling the protesting students "Razakar-er Bachcha [children of war criminals]."

Students of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Science and Technology University in Gopalganj are also staging protests since Tuesday, demanding reduction in different fees at the university.

Academic activities had been hampered at this university for 12 days in late September as students held protests demanding removal of VC Khondoker Md Nasiruddin for allegations of irregularities and corruption.

A UGC probe committee at that time found evidence of irregularities and corruption against the vice chancellor and recommended his removal. The VC resigned on September 30.

Talking to The Daily Star, University Grants Commission Chairman Professor Kazi Shahidullah and Dhaka University Professor Emeritus Serajul Islam Choudhury expressed concerns over the academic impasse at the universities.

They said the protests could session jams.

Asked about the allegations of corruption and irregularities against the VCs, the UGC chairman said, "These allegations are subject to investigation. You must consider someone innocent unless the allegations are proved."

He also said VCs have certain responsibilities and they could not use abusive words. "This was unexpected," he said.

Kazi Shahidullah said they did not want any disorder at the universities as that could lead to session jams prolonging the academic life of the students.

He also said they usually leave it upon the university authorities to solve their own problems. “But now, we are thinking about holding meetings with them before taking any step.”

Serajul Islam Choudhury said, “Students are the victims. There are possibilities that session jams will be created at the universities.”

He also said there were hardly any corruption allegations against VCs in the past.

“Such allegations are surfacing now as the teachers are getting involved in various development activities on the campuses.”

Meanwhile, rights group Ain o Salish Kendra in a statement yesterday said that unrest at the public universities was seriously hampering the academic atmosphere there.

It also called for impartial investigations into the allegations against the university administrations, including the vice-chancellors.