

Govt needs to rethink private university approval

IT IS unpalatable that the government has approved the establishment of six private universities despite allegations of irregularities against, and questions raised about the standards of education in, many existing private universities. What has made matters worse is that of the six universities, two will be set up in the capital city, which has already been crowded with a large number of such universities. As New Age reported on Monday, the International University of Scholars will be set up at Badda while Canadian University of Bangladesh at Tejgaon in Dhaka although educationalists on many occasions requested the government not to approve any more private university in Dhaka, citing lack of space as one of the main reasons. The Private University Act 2010 requires private universities to move to their own campuses in seven years after establishment. The law also stipulates that they must own permanent campuses each on an acre of land, at least, in the capital or two acres outside the capital. There are 85 private universities and 52 of them have completed seven years in operation. What is disconcerting is that only 17 universities have shifted to their own campuses. Controversy has never left the private universities since the Private University Act presented the opportunity to open higher education matrix to the private sector in 1992.

Many of these universities do not have adequate number of qualified teachers and properly equipped libraries and laboratories; they also do not publish research journals, which are mandatory. Most of these universities have flouted, sometimes with a sense of impunity, different provisions of the law that regulate their operation. According to reports in the media, the sponsors of some of the proposed universities have political links. As regards the existing private universities, most of them seem to have become money-making entities for their investors, as the University Grants Commission, tasked with regulation and oversight of higher educational institutions, is hard pressed to keep these institutions on a tight leash and make them comply with the law. The prevailing chaos in private-sector higher education has clearly been the result of accrued regulatory, monitoring and enforcement failures over the years by the authorities concerned. The authorities have talked tough but failed to translate their talks into demonstrative actions. Even, in many cases, they have appeared unduly lenient with the aberrant institutions. For example, the Awami League-led government issued an ultimatum in December 2010 that it would impose an embargo on student enrolment if the non-compliant universities did not move to their own campuses by October 2011 but eventually, in January 2012, decided to grant them a year's extension.

Against such a grim backdrop, it seems unjustifiable on part of the government to have given approval to the private universities in question. Instead, at the moment, it needs to take expeditious steps to take the aberrant universities to task in no time to set prohibitive legal precedent and thus streamline these institutes.