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Of Teachers Students And Newspapers

It would appear from the current atmosphere at DU, and the confusing reportage relating to particular teacher-student problems, that there is something seriously wrong somewhere.

The Vice Chancellor of Dhaka University for one, pointed a finger at some newspapers for publishing "baseless and fabricated" reports that certain male faculty members were guilty of sexually harassing female students. He stated categorically that it was a deliberate attempt at tarnishing the image of the premier educational institution in the country. This indeed is a serious allegation and if not corroborated by irrefutable facts, would be enough to compromise the credibility of that high office.

The Vice Chancellor broached the sexual harassment issue at a recent seminar on newspaper policy and ethics and said that a probe body is already working on the truth or otherwise of the alleged offences. One implicated teacher, we are given to understand, has been temporarily suspended on the basis of an interim report.

Interestingly, there are two groups currently agitating on the campus. One wants the supposed offenders to be punished while the other is out against elements who are allegedly trying to damage the image of DU teachers.

That, in fact, is what another teacher against whom allegations of sexual harassment have also been brought lately, expressed. In a press release he pointed out that "some outsiders had been spreading misleading, untrue, fabricated and politically motivated allegations against him".

This unfortunate state of affairs could have been avoided had the complaints of misdemeanour been dealt with by the University authorities in right earnest to give a fair hearing to both parties, and appropriate punishment where punishment is due. In this context, the demand for a clear code of conduct, guiding the behaviour of both teachers and students on the campus, deserves consideration.

Teacher-student relations ideally should be enriching rather than negative. Therefore, the most desirable behavioural code would be one that institutes mutual respect and does not in any way repress normal human interactions between the mentor and disciple.

As for the disputed reports, it is time for those in opinion-making positions in the mainstream newspaper business to defend their professional position. But if the reports under question depended only on hearsay and not on the strict rules of proper journalism—thorough investigation to verify all information—the editorial management of the newspapers concerned certainly risks being put in the dock.

Journalism, to be worth the name, can never leave ethics and integrity behind it. Those that indulge in sensationalism for its own sake and sacrifice truth and character to the dictates of the "gutter press" deserve the severest censure. And let there be no ambivalence in this regard.

Freedom of the press loses its meaning if it is not anchored in responsibility and the ideals of public service. We hope truth will triumph and competent news-hounds will get to the bottom of this sorry spate of allegations and counter allegations to restore the good name of honest journalism