

A systemic failure in private higher education

A SEVENTH of the 68 private universities accounting for a third of all bachelor's degrees and master's that they conferred in 2013, according to the latest University Grants Commission data made public early this year, certainly speaks of a systemic failure in the higher education management. This is all the more so as this has been a case of a few, that too falling into disrepute because of their activities, as New Age reported on Thursday, overshadowing a large number of them. The private universities, since the first of them being established in 1992 and the number now reaching 83, will have, as many thought, played a major role in the expansion of higher education in view of the limited capacity of all the public universities. But a handful of them, because of their activities, have come to put into question all such institutions, good or bad, especially because of a lenient, or a lack of, oversight on them by the managers of higher education — the government, that is. As most of them continue to be mired in irregularities such as making profits despite being set up as non-profit organisations, facilitation of easy degrees, trading in certificates and not complying with the law that govern them, they have not only marred the prospect of the expansion of higher education in society but have also come to be held, in many cases, in low esteem.

While the oversight authority University Grants Commission and the education ministry have all these years only failed to iron out the issues, conspicuously because of owners of the private universities having political clout, students continue to take admission to private universities of ill repute for a few reasons. In cases, they are unaware of the standards of the institutions and the quality of education therein in the absence of any UGC notification on the matter. In some other cases, they try to earn easy degrees, or buy them, in the absence of proper curriculum being strictly followed. This all has been corroborated, time and again, by UGC officials and their reports and Transparency International, Bangladesh studies. All this has to stop. But for that to happen, the University Grants Commission, which has the oversight authority but not the remedial powers, should be strengthened. The lack of authority is evidenced in what a former commission official is quoted in the New Age report as saying — the commission has limitations; it does not have policing authority.

In light of all this, the government is well advised to look into the issues of profit-making by the private universities, which are not-for-profit entities, as this gives rise to irregularities. The government also needs to empower the University Grants Commission to take remedial action against devious institutions and to impose penalty, through proper checks and balances, on them. The University Grants Commission should also work out and publish a yearly ranking of universities, both private and public, for students, and their guardians, to know where they are spending money on higher education. The sooner it happens, the better.