

Private Universities And Outer Campuses

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As public universities could not accommodate all the students who wished to pursue higher education, in 1992 the then government passed the Private University Act under which the private universities were established. It brought to the fore a debate - whether or not education is a right or a commodity. In public universities education is subsidised and costs the government Taka 55000 per student. Arguably the private universities did fill the gap between supply and demand and of great importance, can be credited with creating session-jam free education. However the Private University Act made it mandatory for private universities to fulfil all the conditions regarding academic, financial and infrastructural on the main campus before opening an outer campus. Unfortunately not a single one could fulfill all the conditions of the Act.

Private universities were set up to fill a felt need for higher education of an international standard. They were encouraged by the government for two reasons - one because the state universities could no longer accommodate the number of applicants and two - to discourage parents from sending their children to universities abroad. The reasoning was that; if the same standard of education can be provided at home for a fraction of the cost, children would be persuaded to stay here which would in turn, reduce the brain drain. But some of the universities took this as a carte blanche for running the institutions as commercial ventures thus, when most opened their doors to students it was not so much to encourage education as to make money.

Now the Interim Government has decided to take a stand and will close down over 100 outer campuses - approved or unapproved - that have been set up by a number of universities. The chairman of the University Grants commission, the body that regulates public and private universities said, "It has been decided that all the outer campuses set up and run in the last few years will be closed down as they have been selling certificates in the name of education." In the past the UGC has identified irregularities in at least 18 areas of private universities and asked them to submit reports on these irregularities to the commission.

Irregularities listed included high tuition fees, poor educational standards, inadequate physical facilities, poor curriculum and lack of laboratory facilities. At the time we wrote it could be we shall soon see some of the private universities closing their doors - either voluntarily or by force. It now seems that prophecy is coming true.

Any institution going by the name of a university must fulfil the basic need of society before it can lay claim to its right to exist. The government has a responsibility to look into the genesis as well as operation of those universities. But any measure taken must not be an end to itself and any proposed action must be taken with the intention of improving the conditions inside these hallowed halls of learning. Under no circumstance should these measures be taken to put a damper on those universities that are doing well.

The UGC chairman also said the private universities will not be allowed to offer BEd and MEd degrees. "Such degrees can only be conferred by the government and non-government teachers' training colleges under the National University," he said. One or two universities have been offering such degrees under a programme of distance learning with government approval but this decision appears to have been reversed and, although they may continue to offer other degrees, BEd and Med will no longer be on offer presumably because the quality of the teachers are in question. In this respect the concerned private universities will be issued letters asking them not to enroll new students in their outer campuses. However, those already enrolled may complete their courses.

A task force will also be formed under the supervision of the Ministry of Education to ensure the closure of outer campuses and the conferring of BEd and MEd degrees. Last year also newspapers reported that some private universities were selling certificates - for a price. But universities offering distance education were encouraging fraud as students did not need to attend any courses. And as we recall, we had touched on this subject of outer campuses set up without permission but there was never any outcry. Now things seem to be different.

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