

## UGC report on university education

*Quality remains the biggest concern*

**T**HE annual report submitted to Parliament by the University Grants Commission for the year 2008 is a clear wake up call that needs to be heeded. The UGC informs us that the objectives of higher education are not being met by the nation's public and private universities, barring we would add, some notable exceptions. There is something of the ironic here. When private universities began to be set up in the early 1990s, it was expected that they would not only widen the sphere of education but would also, in a proper spirit of competition, help enhance the quality of it. While some of them may well have met the expectations, the majority have not.

The UGC has cited a whole tranche of reasons for this poor situation. Interestingly enough, these are reasons citizens by and large believe to be real owing to the experience of these past many years. The effects of political partisanship among teaching staff on education have certainly impeded intellectual growth among the young and among teachers as well. The old problem of session jams persists, with students finishing their education a good many years after they are originally supposed to. The UGC report speaks for all of us when it lambasts the unbridled consultancy which teachers have regularly engaged in, with the result that they have often failed to carry out their professional duties in the classroom. Which brings us to the pretty unsettling matter of teachers at public universities taking leave in order to have a stint or two of teaching at private universities. That such action has hampered the institutions where they are employed full time has often been ignored. At another level, in general private universities have had part time faculty drawn from other, largely public universities, teaching their students. That in turn has prevented these private universities from developing their own teaching staff, with the result that the sense of commitment which must be an essential component of teaching has been absent. In a sense, an ad hoc arrangement has often stymied intellectual growth in the private universities. It is students who have suffered.

The recent student unrest at some private universities around such issues as arbitrary fees only hints at the disorder that could set in if matters are not set right. And it is a whole range of matters that needs careful and farsighted handling. Universities dwindle into insignificance when the funds they need for research (and universities are places for constant research) are not there. Overall, the points raised in the UGC report call not only for a thorough recasting of education at the university level but also the formulation of patent policies aimed at ensuring a consistent, goals-oriented system of higher education.

Last but certainly not the least, it is time to wrest university education out of the elitism it seems to have become trapped in. For that to be done, it is important that public and private universities not be confined within the nation's capital or its radius but move outward. The UGC suggestion relating to the setting up of universities in greater Faridpur, the Chittagong Hill Tracts and Bogra merits serious consideration across the spectrum. One final point: the time has perhaps come for us to revisit the 1973 University Ordinance, if for no other reason than for ensuring a greater degree of transparency about the way in which our universities work.