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## Private Universities And The UGC

The Association of Private Universities of Bangladesh has demanded that it should be given the authority to approve new private universities over the head of the University Grants Commission, the regulatory body of public and private institutions of higher education. The four-month old association has also termed the proposed amendments to the Private University Act 1992, drafted by the commission as 'tyrannical' and feared the proposed amendments would hamper the expansion of private universities. But the UGC has a moral responsibility of ensuring that private universities not only are run efficiently but also appoint the very best teaching staff.

There is a growing perception that the standards at the private universities are not what they should be and that the students at the public universities can still demonstrate a level of intellectual competence that outclasses those students in private universities. The presence of external examiners at a university is evidence of a focused system and as such the private universities should not be opposed to a proposal to allow such examiners as this would add substance to the private university system.

The University Grants Commission by suggesting a uniform system of grading to be followed by public as well as private universities, has presented us with an idea that should be considered in the larger interest of education as it is difficult to distinguish between the examination results of public and private university students because of the separate procedures followed. It is in this light that the proposal for a uniform grading system merits serious consideration. As many as 75 vice-chancellors of universities, both public and private, have agreed, in principle, to implement the UGC's recommendations for introduction of a uniform grading system and as yet, there has been little indication of any opposition from the private universities but as there is obvious reluctance on the part of the private universities to cooperate with the UGC, there could be trouble ahead.

Terming the UGC 'a funding authority' for public universities only, as the founder of Manarat International University and convener of the association said, the chance for coming to any understanding fades. He also said the UGC should not monitor private universities as 'they do not receive government grants' and should not speak to the vice-chancellors on the amendments to the act as they are merely our paid employees and do not share our profits or losses. Saying that the private universities would not abide by the rules and regulations of the UGC or the ministry, if the opinions and interests of the owners were ignored, he claimed that the performance of the 53 universities 'is satisfactory'.

This is a cause of dispute as a high powered committee that went to work some time ago to ascertain the performance of private universities, recommended the shutting down of 8 of them immediately for their deplorable performance. The committee also found at least 18 more private universities seriously deficient in many ways and suggested that their operators should be told to improve standards. If they failed to do so within a stipulated period of time, then tough penal measures should be taken against them. Its recommendations also included urging most of the private universities to observe rules pertaining to their academic standards and creation of various physical facilities.

As for the public, the high costs of the private universities have meant that they are off-limits for many students. The UGC agrees with this view and recommends lowering of fees of most of these universities and admitting poor but meritorious students free of charge, or on the basis of nominal payment. It felt that only then could these universities live up to expectations of the people. Moreover, with the exception of a few private universities, the teaching standard and academic atmosphere are in doubt but this has not prevented them from charging high fees. In the past decade or so, the emergence of more than fifty private universities has brought home the lesson that, while some of the pressure on higher education at the public universities has been relieved, these are some of the other problems that have crept in.