

Government Facilitation of Private Higher Education in Bangladesh: The Partnership Approach

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Abstract This study aimed to identify the key areas in which private universities in Bangladesh require government support, and to analyze the current sectoral context for delineating the optimal nature of required government facilitation. The country's private tertiary institutions are facing restrictive governance strategies at a time when effective government support is vital for enhancing private universities' increasingly important role in nation-building. This qualitative study was based on particular tenets of grounded theory, using open-ended, axial and selective coding for analyzing data collected from open-ended interviews and secondary sources. Interview participants were selected through purposive sampling on the basis of their administrative, policymaking and pedagogical roles in private higher education. The coded results showed the need for government support in the areas of quality assurance, curriculum standardization, research facilitation and faculty development through foresighted governance and policy approaches. The emergent theory of "the Partnership Approach" shows that instead of regulation-focused government interventions, collaborative and supportive governance policies are required for bolstering private higher education in Bangladesh.

Keywords: Bangladesh, facilitation, government, partnership, private university

Introduction

Prioritizing higher education is essential for building a manpower base that can meet the demands of today's rapidly evolving socio-economic scenarios. Worldwide, existing economic and social dynamics are making way for disruptive innovation; the breathtaking pace of technological upheavals, acting in tandem with geopolitical uncertainty, has increased the stakes for national workforce competitiveness. For Bangladesh, a country which aspires to reach middle-income status by 2021, addressing the needs of its workforce relies overwhelmingly on the development of higher education.

Starting with just four publicly-financed autonomous universities at the time of independence, Bangladesh has made dramatic advancements in improving access to tertiary education. While the vast majority of university students are enrolled in public institutions, the past two decades have seen an increasingly important role played by private universities in developing the national workforce. Over the past ten years, the number of private universities has doubled; over 400,000 students are studying in 95 private universities around the country (UGC, 2018). As of 2018, the average age of private universities is approximately 14 years – implying that early starters in the sector are approaching a mature stage of operations. Simultaneously, new institutions are entering the foray to fulfill the existing supply-demand gap for higher education to the masses. In the face of the rapid expansion of the sector, both old and new private tertiary institutions face considerable challenges concerning their quality of education and range of services.

Identifying the nature of government intervention required for sustainable growth in the sector is imperative for combating these challenges. The future of private higher education in the country hinges, to a great extent, on effective, timely and optimally guided policy formulation

and implementation. Nevertheless, the current nature of government interventions are often perceived to be overly geared toward a regime of supervisory rules and restrictive specifications, such as physical building inspections, construction of campus on land owned by the institution itself, approval of curricula and syllabus etc. The dominant status quo of government-university interactions demonstrates a missed opportunity for pursuing institutional and academic excellence. By taking an alternate approach through proactive policy measures and innovative governance, the bureaucracy can ensure its optimal assistance in facilitating an enabling environment for sectoral progress.

This study intends to investigate the areas where government assistance is most crucial at the moment, with a focus on how the government can shift from “*supervision, monitoring and regulation*” to a more facilitative approach. Governance policies will definitely play a crucial role in the immediate and long-term ramifications for ensuring sustained sectoral progress in terms of both quality and access. With this context in mind, this study is an attempt to shed light on aligning the government’s role in accordance to current local and global realities in the key improvement areas of Bangladesh’s private tertiary education sector.

Government Support for Education

Government measures for facilitating higher education include adopting policies that promote national objectives, providing incentives to stimulate appropriate improvements by providers, and ensuring equality of opportunity and equity in educational access (Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development [OECD], 2003). These interventions in the educational arena encompass many different aspects of education including financing, fluctuations in student numbers and pedagogical orientations (Maroy, 2012).

Mostly a public sector affair throughout modern history, the higher education sector in the developed world has been undergoing a dynamic shift toward privatization and deregulation. Since the 1990s, higher education policies in Japan have started focusing on liberalization, deregulation and increased institutional autonomy (Yamaguchi & Tsukahara, 2016). In the United States, the Ohio state government's support for the sector has shifted from strict regulations to "partially regulated" and "highly deregulated" approaches (Camou & Patton, 2012).

The local tertiary education sectors in developing nations like Bangladesh are unique in many aspects, including complexity in categorizing educational institutions and mostly centralized regulation. Bangladesh's higher education system consists of various subsectors that contain both public and private institutions. These institutions have different regulators, different academic standards, different types of students, and different interests (World Bank, 2017). The regulatory regime in place pivots around central government structures and bureaucratic bodies, and introduces provisions that regulate and monitor the establishment and market entry of new public universities (World Bank, 2017). For instance, the entry and operation of private universities is regulated by the Private Universities Act of 2010, and the government through the Ministry of Education must grant permission for a new private institution to be established (World Bank, 2017).

Perhaps the most notable development in the tertiary education sector in Bangladesh has been the swift development of the private sector. Because many new (mostly private for-profit) institutions are being created, the government and the regulatory agencies should continuously update their practices to keep up with shifting industry dynamics (World Bank, 2017). However, the support strategies currently in place are not always commensurate with the needs of the private education sector. In issues related to funding, for instance, private universities

receive public funding only in very specific circumstances (World Bank, 2017). Moreover, performance-based funding is not in place for either public or private institutions in Bangladesh. This means that universities, colleges, and other tertiary institutions are unable to negotiate any performance targets with the government or with their regulatory agencies (World Bank, 2017). The status quo of government support directed toward Bangladeshi private universities deems it necessary to redraw some vital aspects of government-university interactions.

A Partnership Approach

The discourse on government facilitation of higher education is observed to pivot on increasingly “coordinated” systems that re-conceptualize or re-commit to coordination across the entire higher education system (Maroy, 2012). Over the past two decades, significant changes in the governance of education systems have been put into place as international institutions, governments, firms, philanthropies and consultants have promoted more hybrid partnership arrangements, involving new combinations of state and non-state actors engaged in a range of activities within the education sector (Robertson, Mundy, & Verger, 2012). This has led to a shift from the traditional “regulation”, which, in a legal and political sense, is considered as “the totality of institutional arrangements and control mechanisms and the framing of actions by a recognised political authority” (Maroy, 2012).

Such shifts may lead to “rebalancing” in the changing forms of the governance of education, for instance a gradual shift from regulation to self-evaluation in England (Ozga, 2009). Two “post-bureaucratic” (Maroy, 2012) models illustrate the state’s redefined roles in higher education governance: the quasi-market model and the evaluative state model. In quasi-market regulation, while the states delegates autonomy to institutions, it retains the important role of defining system

objectives and the teaching curriculum. The evaluative state model focuses on evaluation of processes and results which affect the distribution of incentives or sanctions. For example, funding and quality recognition are new instruments of control and influence over institutions, through which they can be held accountable for performance (Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development [OECD], 2003).

Maroy (2012) further demonstrates that the public regulation of educational systems is no longer merely hierarchical and bureaucratic; rather, the new forms of coordinated, partnership-and-evaluation perspectives discussed above are perhaps more applicable in the current context. For example, a favorable governance framework, full academic freedom, and generous public funding led to performance improvements for Hong Kong University of Science and Technology and lack of the aforesaid factors resulted in underwhelming performance for other institutions (Postiglione, 2011). Similar instances abound in both the developed and developing world scenarios (Achimugu, Oluwagbem & Oluwaranti, 2010; Altbach & Salmi, 2011; Boye & Mannan, 2014; Mohsin & Kamal, 2012) and demonstrate the apparent effectiveness of facilitation-oriented policies.

Purposes of the Research

In general, this study aimed to examine the nature of government facilitation required for bolstering private higher education in Bangladesh after identifying the areas where intervention is most required. Specifically, the study sought answers to the following objectives:

1. Identify and analyze the key areas in need of government support for the development of private higher education in Bangladesh

2. Explore the development of a new approach for providing optimal government support to the private higher education sector

Methodology

Research Design

This paper followed some of the themes outlined by “grounded theory” (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990) method for qualitative research. The grounded theory approach results in theories are emergent¹; the research does not test a hypothesis, nor does it contain a formal literature review. Starting with a systematic, inductive approach to collecting data, the research used primary data collected as the basis of investigation. The primary phase of the research was conducted in natural settings. The next stage of the research was aimed at achieving theoretical saturation through secondary data sources.

Sampling and participants

The selection of interviewees was done by non-probability based judgmental sampling. Purposive sampling was used to include academicians and education policy experts. In particular, local participants included members of the Bangladesh University Grants Commission, an Adviser to the honorable Prime Minister, university Presidents and Vice-Chancellors, researchers from South Asian think-tanks, and faculty members from various universities. A total of 33 key informant interviews were conducted until data saturation was achieved for shaping the proceedings of the inquiry.

¹A working definition shows the emergent method as “inductive, indeterminate, and open-ended,” which begins with the empirical world and builds an inductive understanding of it as events unfold and knowledge accrues. (Charmaz, 2009)

Instruments

A semi-structured, open-ended questionnaire was used as the instrument for obtaining primary data. The questionnaire was administered verbally on a one-on-one basis between the respondent and the interviewer. The question content was designed with a certain degree of flexibility for allowing case-by-case variations. Questions progressed from the least sensitive to the most sensitive, from the factual and behavioral to the cognitive, and from the more general to the more specific. The responses elicited from the interviews were recorded, and used to form constructs by identifying common patterns through recurring themes. The following table demonstrates selected sample items from interviewees' responses, and the corresponding construct(s) as well as the broad "issues" that were identified on the basis on thematic similarities between the constructs.

A rigorous process was undertaken for establishing content validity, which included post-interview data screening and code-recode procedure. The instrument was deemed valid due to the one-on-one nature of interviewing undertaken by the researcher, which facilitated intensive listening and detailed note-taking. The researcher also attempted to ensure that responses to follow-up questions were not influenced by previous questions.

Data Collection

Primary Data Collection.

Primary data collection for the purpose of this research was primarily conducted through semi-structured interviewing. A qualitative interview protocol was used for acquiring case-specific information. The pre-interview preparatory questions were designed for facilitation of a semi-formal setup. Interview questions were open-ended, with focus on eliciting both

facts and opinions from the respondent(s). The interviews were administered in the form of depth interviews conducted

Table 1. Sample Items per Construct.

Issues (Axial Codes)	Constructs (Open Codes)	Sample items
Quality Assurance Issues	Autonomous Entity for Supervision	“An accreditation council would go a long way to ensure that universities actively focus on quality.”
		“A UGC free from undue externalities is a powerful, effective UGC.”
	Academic Guiding Mechanisms	“We lack a measure of quality – like a universal standard that could be applied countrywide.”
Pedagogical Manpower Issues	Facilitating Research	“Instead of having to approve every single new course a university wants to introduce, there could be a single standardized guideline for subjects, say, specific courses in business must have this theory in the syllabus, or must have the provision of at least one field visit.”
	Faculty Training and Development	“Practical applications of research in universities can promote innovation in the business sector.”
		“The government needs to inspire, incentivize and promote our researchers.”
Forward-looking Approaches to Governance	Budgetary Allocation	“Many of our most talented, young faculty members have gone to Western countries after working with us for brief stints.”
		“I believe the government should create more self-development opportunities for university teachers.”
	Digitalization for Smart Solutions	“We are yet to see education given its due priority in successive national budgets.”
		“Investment in education is equivalent to investing in the nation’s future.”
		“The government is firmly committed to Digital Bangladesh through digital education.”
		“Education is going out of the classroom.”

through telephone conversations and personal meetings. This stage of the research resulted in the incorporation of 33 key informant interviews as preliminary sources of information. All interviews were administered by the researcher to avoid complications in code-recode procedure.

Secondary Data Collection.

Secondary information was procured from peer-reviewed journals, relevant books, and conference proceedings. Online databases, global indices, government databases and annual reports of the University Grants Commission provided facts and figures relevant to the study. Country reports, working papers and conference proceedings published by the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank were important sources of data and insights. A review of international best practices from national higher education policies of Singapore, India, Pakistan, Ireland and Colombia, among others, consolidated the data collection process.

Data Analysis

Initially, the insights garnered from the primary data provided the framework which served as basis of further analysis. The data collected from primary sources were integrated into categories through open coding and axial coding of the data. The coded data directed the study to approach theoretical saturation through application of theories and reference to examples deemed pertinent to the proceedings. Complementary data and case studies were analyzed simultaneously in the discussion to arrive at emerging themes pertinent to the research purpose (*Table 4*). The incorporation of categories that emerged from successive levels of analysis provided broad patterns that ultimately led to theoretical saturation and selective coding to arrive at the emergent theory (*Table 5*).

Findings

Manifold challenges confront the private tertiary education sector of Bangladesh in its dual mission of ensuring quality and access to higher education. The three key issues that need to be urgently addressed by the government are: establishing universally enforced quality standards, developing a base of qualified teachers and researchers, and adopting forward-looking approaches to governance.

Quality Assurance Issues

Autonomous Entity for Supervision.

The rapid expansion of private tertiary education in Bangladesh necessitates the existence of a central authority specializing in quality control and evaluation. For example, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in the UK and the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) are mandated to **inspect, audit and report** on institutional quality procedures. In India, 140 universities got themselves accredited by the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), with only 32% percent rated as “A grade” or above. Of the 2780 colleges accredited by NAAC, only 9% were graded ‘A’ or above (Government of India, 2016). On a similar note, a national accreditation agency could play the role of an autonomous entity for quality assurance in Bangladesh.

The establishment of private universities in Bangladesh was initiated after the ratification of the Private University Act 1992. These institutions are currently governed according to the Private University Act 2010, which provides the University Grants Commission with the authority to supervise, monitor and regulate the activities of the private universities (UGC, 2016). The Commission acts as the primary link between the government and all universities of Bangladesh. It is not, however, an autonomous body – as per the *University Grants*

Commission Act of 1973, the UGC is required to submit annual audit reports and activity reports to the national government.

An independent, empowered entity responsible for quality assurance is also important in the context of ensuring impartiality and fair practice in higher education. Independent academic operations of public universities, which are supposed to be autonomous, are often impeded by political interference. Scope for such irregularities exists since various quarters can effectively influence proceedings of intermediary entities, which are bound to accept the counsel of the legislative and executive bodies of the state. It is thus very important to establish an independent body, free from political restraints, with singular focus on facilitating and evaluating quality enhancement of tertiary education. India's ongoing efforts to transform its UGC into the Higher Education Empowerment Regulation Agency (HEERA) could be emulated by other countries facing similar challenges.

Academic Guiding Mechanisms.

Astutely designed academic guiding mechanisms can ensure updated course curricula, ease academic workloads for students, and ensure future relevance. The foremost requirement is introducing a market-driven curriculum for building a workforce that can meet today's rapidly evolving demands. Strong university-industry linkages can be forged and pursued to promote greater interaction between academic and industrial R&D and to facilitate technology transfer. The USA has a strong system of academic research that constantly conveys its findings to the commercial realm, as attested by the fact that academic technology transfer contributed over \$187 billion to the nation's GDP between 1996 and 2007 (Boye & Mannan, 2014).

In the local context, introducing innovation in course structure and design is difficult for individual universities due to lengthy bureaucratic procedures. For example, to

implement any change in a course, a private university needs to hold an initial meeting with the faculty and gain approval from its Academic Council. Afterwards, the proposal is sent to the UGC which subsequently passes it on to an anonymous reviewer for final authorization (Choudhury, 2016). Instead of this case-by-case basis of course approval, standardized course modules could be introduced. One example of standardization could be Ireland's reforms leading to "modularisation"² of programs. The term "modularisation" involves redrafting all programs into a particular format of individual modules or sections. Furthermore, each module is given a credit weighting relative to the amount and quality of study achieved – and this module is implemented throughout relevant programs across all universities in the country.

As the only supervising and monitoring authority in the country, the University Grants Commission also acts as an "approving" authority as all new academic programs of a private university have to be approved by the UGC. Since this approval process facilitates standard setting and benchmarking (Lamagna, 2006), there are significant scopes for "standardization" of courses. Given the UGC's existing method for authorization of new courses, it can easily formulate and enforce standardized course modules in line with Ireland's modularisation initiative.

Pedagogical Manpower Issues

Facilitating Research.

Fostering and sustaining an ecosystem of research is also a major challenge for Bangladesh. The variables of off-campus and on-campus research facilities have important impacts

²Each module has detailed specifications covering title, objectives, academic contents, assessment procedures and learning outcomes. These modules are implemented throughout relevant programs across all universities in the country.

on the quality of education in private higher learning centers of Bangladesh. Increasing the number of research bureaus, widening publication facilities (Ashraf, Ibrahim & Joardar, 2009) and providing adequate research materials in the libraries (Alam, Haque & Siddiqui, 2007) are important for enhancing the spirit of research within the student-teacher community.

Current research-facilitating initiatives by the government include competitive research funding from the “Academic Innovation Fund” provided under the Higher Education Quality Enhancement Project (HEQEP). In addition to HEQEP, the Ministry of Education has a competitive funding program titled “Research and Innovation Fund” which invites research proposals from the universities and scientists of the country. The funding program awards grants through a transparent selection process done by peer reviewers (World Bank, 2017). Besides incentivizing research through grants, the concerned authorities have brought a number of researchers under university-based online networks.

The UGC has also been funding a limited pool of research work over the years. Future plans show a definite lack of ambition in scaling up these facilitative activities. The targeted numbers of research works commissioned and numbers of academics connected with online research networks remain static from 2017 to 2019, as seen from the following table.

Table 2. UGC’s Activities for Facilitating Research Among Faculty Members.

Activity	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18 (target)	2018-19 (target)	2019-2020 (target)
Number of Researchers brought under university-based online networks	0	72	30	30	30
Number of Research Works Commissioned	40	45	50	50	55

In contrast to the insubstantial research allocation schemes experienced by the local researcher community, the expenditure on basic research in the higher education sector of Singapore increased from \$115.1 million in 2000 to \$462.4 million in 2009. In Ireland, the government plans to increase the target for investment in R&D to 3% of GDP by 2030. The government in Bangladesh should make R&D investment a national priority for improving this key competitiveness factor. An unfortunate spillover effect of low R&D expenditure is the difficulty faced in attracting and retention of “star” faculty members, most of whom would invariably seek better research opportunities overseas.

Faculty Training and Development.

Government facilitation of quality university education in Bangladesh can enable quality outputs through managing inputs. One key element is teacher quality, as consistent findings from education research show that teacher quality strongly influences student outcomes (Hanushek & Wößmann, 2007). Ensuring faculty credentials by hiring and retaining talented teachers is imperative for maintaining quality. Calculated from data provided by Altbach and Salmi (2011) on ten exemplary research universities³, the average number of students was 11.7 per teacher. The average figure was 15.1 for nineteen⁴ European countries for 2015 (Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 2017). In that year, the ratio of teachers to students for private universities in Bangladesh stood at 1:25 (UGC, 2016).

³University of Ibadan, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Pohang University of Science and Technology, University of Chile, Catholic University of Chile, Indian Universities of Technology, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, University of Malaya, National University of Singapore and Monterey Institute of Technology

⁴Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom

The factor of part-time teachers is prioritized by the ADB (2014), stating that when numbers of part-time faculty begin to pass 10% of the total, their disproportionate presence can have a negative effect on education quality. In Bangladesh, private universities are becoming increasingly dependent on adjunct faculty members – the number of *fulltime* faculty members in 2015 was actually less than the previous year’s (UGC, 2016). In addition, most of the doctorate degree-holding teachers are part-timers – indicating the relative shortage of highly qualified teaching professionals. Ehsan (2008) contends that, ideally, full-time faculty members should constitute 80% of a university’s teaching staff. While part-time contracts provide curricular flexibility and accommodation to fiscal restraint, disproportionate numbers of part-time faculty are actually detrimental to the institutions’ scholarly productivity. Bangladesh needs to develop and retain at least 10,000 qualified faculty members within the next five years⁵ if the government wishes to maintain a minimum teacher-student of 1:30 for private universities.

One of the most important preconditions for ensuring access to quality higher education is budgetary allocation. The Kothari Commission established by the Indian government recommended a 6% budgetary allocation for education, which was implemented by the National Education Policy of 1986. It is interesting to note that a sizeable amount of the Bangladesh government’s expenditure is invested in the *total* education system, almost on par with countries such as Colombia and Ireland. However, allocation for tertiary education is very low – in 2011, expenditure in tertiary education was only of 1.8% total government expenditure in Bangladesh, compared to 4.7% in India and 7.8% in Malaysia (see Table 3). The comparisons confirm the contention that the GoB should allocate 6-8% of its total expenditure of higher education.

⁵Author’s calculations based on UGC data

Forward-looking Approaches to Governance

Budgetary Allocation.

Table 3. WDI Indicators for Government Expenditure in Education.

Country	Indicator ^a	2011	2012	2013
Bangladesh	Expenditure on education as % of total government expenditure	16.8	15.6	13.8
	Expenditure on tertiary education as % of total government expenditure	1.8
India	Expenditure on education as % of total government expenditure	13.7	14.1	14.1
	Expenditure on tertiary education as % of total government expenditure	4.7	4.5	..
Malaysia	Expenditure on education as % of total government expenditure	21.0	19.9	19.5
	Expenditure on tertiary education as % of total government expenditure	7.8	..	7.3
Singapore	Expenditure on education as % of total government expenditure	19.9	21.2	20.0
	Expenditure on tertiary education as % of total government expenditure	7.3	8.0	7.0
Colombia	Expenditure on education as % of total government expenditure	15.5	15.5	16.9
	Expenditure on tertiary education as % of total government expenditure	3.2	3.4	3.0
Ireland	Expenditure on education as % of total government expenditure	12.6	13.8	13.5
	Expenditure on tertiary education as % of total government expenditure	2.8	3.0	..

^a *World Development Indicators (WDI) compiled from databank.worldbank.org*

Digitalization for Smart Solutions.

Digitalization initiatives have immense potential to solve twofold issues at one stroke – firstly, by vastly improving access to education and secondly, by mitigating the problem of teacher shortage and research facilities. E-library services, research gateways, e-learning methods, educational resource planning etc. are just some of the avenues leading to the

exciting new frontiers of digital education. Online libraries and repositories are extremely effective in democratizing learning options and providing learning material to students. Multimedia content propagated through the internet has already revolutionized access to educational material through providing instructional materials free of cost to millions. Limitless potential remains where traditional classroom-based education could change forever by incorporating artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and artificial reality for the benefit of both recipient and provider.

The findings show that the government needs to give more priority to higher education in the form of assuring education quality, ensuring adequate supply of teachers, and enhancing financial and digital capabilities of the sector. In order to maintain a minimum quality standard for private higher education, there must be an independent authority responsible for sectoral oversight. Standardization or “modularisation” of courses is required for effective quality assurance. The government needs to focus on enhancing and, in some cases, supplementing the teacher base through faculty training. The government also needs to look into the potential of digital solutions for offsetting the lack of qualified faculty members. Astute policy decisions, in the form of proper budgetary allocations and a forward-looking approach with widespread digitalization in mind, are vital for the sustained growth and development of private universities.

Discussion

Outstanding tertiary educational institutions, be they publicly or privately run, cannot operate without external government support. There are key forces at play at the level of the ecosystem within which tertiary education institutions evolve. These forces can have a facilitating or constraining effect, depending on the circumstances.

Addressing Policy Concerns

The Accreditation Council Act of 2017, passed by the Parliament on March 7, 2017 has raised hopes for a quality assurance body acting independent of external interference. The Act is expected to implement a “National Qualifications Framework” for higher education that was drafted by the UGC. With breakneck expansion in recent years driving down higher education quality, 11 out of 15 Asian countries (excluding the more advanced systems of the PRC, Japan, and the Republic of Korea) now possess semiautonomous government agencies charged with quality assurance and accreditation in higher education (ADB, 2014). Bangladesh is finally mobilizing efforts to ensure independent accreditation in line with its Asian counterparts.

In addition to accreditation, centrally imposed standardization in course design, content delivery and quality evaluation have the potential to have salutary implications for ensuring quality higher education. Specific subjects and courses could be provided with unique regulations pertaining to various aspects of their syllabus, course progression, credit points, grading schemes etc. Practical activities for technical subjects, industry-related work for business students, audio-visual productions for arts and humanities subjects, and a host of timely prerequisites could be enforced by the UGC.

The Strategic Plan for Higher Education in Bangladesh: 2017-2030 includes policy and program suggestions pertaining to the three key missions of higher education: (1) teaching, (2) research, and (3) service. It also mentions the importance of enhancing the quality of teaching by increasing the number of faculty members holding PhDs. The document proposes the creation of a National Research Council, which would be responsible for planning national research priorities, coordinating activities between different

partners and funding sources, increasing the research capacity of the country, and awarding competitive research grants.

For motivating lifelong pedagogy, Singapore has taken a long-term retention fund (Mohsin & Kamal, 2012) named CONNECT (Continuity, Experience and Commitment). Such capital-intensive measures may be difficult for the GoB to implement; it could instead focus on high-impact projects for fostering a vibrant research ecosystem. By increasing the scope of interlinked researcher networks,⁶ facilitating international collaboration and increasing spending in R&D, the government can create a sustainable research ecosystem which will, in turn, attract and retain a pool of talented researchers. The implications of foresight can be exemplified by the example of Colombia's Universidad del Norte, which implemented a strategy for sending faculty members abroad for Ph.D.s in the early 1990s. After a decade, the proportion of the country's papers which had international coauthors stood at 46 percent – demonstrating the effective international linkages formulated due to the farsighted strategy.

Essentially, investing in higher education is equivalent to investing in the future of a nation. World Bank research shows that globally, the rates of return for graduates of tertiary education are the highest in the entire educational system—an average 17 percent increase in earnings as compared with 10 percent for primary and 7 percent for secondary education (Ehsan, 2008). As public expenditure on education was reported to be a meager 2.24% of GNP, the government recognizes the importance of increasing expenditure on education to 6% of GNP, at least, by 2021 (GoB, 2012). While the trend is encouraging, there is still a long way ahead for the policy changes to fully take effect and thus macro-level initiatives still have a considerable role to play in this regard.

⁶Currently, the UGC is undertaking similar activities albeit at a small scale; pertinent discussion can be found in section 3.2.1

Table 4. Addressing Policy Concerns for Bolstering Private Higher Education in Bangladesh.

Areas of Policy Concern	Exemplary Models	Emerging Themes	Categories of Action
Quality Assurance	India's NAAC; Pakistan's accreditation councils established by the HEC	Ensure neutral agency for accreditation; Consider the viability of discipline-specific agencies instead of a single agency	Formulate independent bodies for facilitation of higher education institutions
	Ireland's "modularization" of courses	Formulate standardized course content for optimizing industry linkage and relevance of content	
Pedagogical Manpower	Singapore's incentive plans; Pakistan's digital library strategy	Focus on low-cost, high-impact projects e.g. digital libraries and online research networks	Shift policy focus to facilitation, empowerment and support
	Colombia's Universidad del Norte's faculty development plan	Develop and retain an adequate number of qualified faculty members	
Paradigm Shift in Governance	India, Malaysia, Singapore's budgetary allocation	Allocate about 10% of budget on overall education	
	Nigeria's integration of ICT in education	Integrate ICT with centrally imposed policymaking	

The role of technology in higher education is approaching the point where nearly all phases of the educational process may be potentially redefined by use of disruptive tools. In developing Nigeria, ICTs have been embedded as an integral part of national education policies and plans (Achimugu, Oluwagbemi & Oluwaranti, 2010). Countries like Bangladesh could attain major advancement in tertiary education reach and quality by integrating ICT with centrally imposed policymaking. Interestingly, it seems that private universities were at the forefront of technological adoptions

at their initial stage. At least two private tertiary institutions had installed internet facilities in their libraries before Dhaka University got itself an internet-enabled library in 1998 (Islam & Islam, 2007).

The imperative lies with the government for outlining a strategy for successful development and implementation of innovations. There is widespread consensus on the importance of the government's active role in sectoral improvement of private higher education (Boye & Mannan, 2014; ADB, 2015; Islam & Arefin, 2017). For instance, the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan set up a centrally-managed digital library in the early 2000s. For proper utilization of the digital repository, 8,850 potential users were enrolled in formal training sessions from 2003 to 2006. In the following years, the usage of the online resources multiplied and the number of research articles published annually increased nearly threefold within five years (Soroya, 2011). In Bangladesh, the UGC has already installed university digital library (UDL) facilities, providing access to more than 7,000 academic journals and reference books. By building awareness and providing incentives, the authorities can ensure widespread adoption and usage of digital infrastructure.

Adopting the Partnership Approach

Addressing the macro-level issues discussed above requires an umbrella higher education law, given that higher education legislation is conspicuously outdated in Bangladesh (ADB, 2014). It is equally important to incorporate opinions and feedback from as many sectors as possible. The Singapore government, for improving dialogue and improving its counseling bodies, set up an international academic advisory panel comprised of prominent scholars from international higher education institutions and corporate leaders (Mohsin & Kamal, 2012). The implementation plan of the Higher Education Authority Ireland (2011) includes the participation, recommendations and support of various government institutions

and bodies. Facilitating exchange of views and ideas among the government, intermediary bodies, scholars, entrepreneurs, specialists and experts can contribute to effective policymaking and optimize legislative efforts in Bangladesh.

Most importantly, the government has to treat higher education policy as integral part of national development plans, and regard institutions as national assets. The public policy makers of Bangladesh must integrate education policies with national development policies while drafting national development plans. The curricula of the higher education system must reflect those priorities set in national development plans that focus on developing a strong human resource base. “Gap funding” grants paying for digital library access to selected journals and providing international bandwidth for internet access, akin to the Pakistan model, could be initiated. Besides emphasizing the need to increase government budgetary share in education, the current discourse also discusses on improving the situation through “cost-sharing” with beneficiaries and thereby making education less dependent on public resources.

One cost-sharing instrument, as discussed by Amogpai, Graff, Halme, Kouva, Omidiora, Tang & Temmes (2010) is the concept of “open innovation”. Open innovation started in the ICT sector and is different from the traditional “closed innovation” model. In the traditional closed innovation model, organizations rely primarily on their own R&D departments to innovate. If these innovations do not fit the organization’s strategy or operational policy, they often remain unused within the boundaries of the entity itself. This traditional model is akin to the status quo of private university innovation in the country.

In an open innovation system, organizations look both “outside-in” and “inside-out”. When considered for tertiary institutions, outside-in means that institutions outsource and integrate the external knowledge of students, teachers, other universities, research organizations, corporate entities, etc. for

innovation. Inside-out means that individual universities let unused ideas be used by other institutions – thus, institutional boundaries become more permeable, enabling innovation to move more easily between the external environment and the individual entity’s internal innovation process. Such a system can lead to manifold benefits for the private higher education sector, especially in case of technological adoptions. Similar joint collaboration among public, private and other stakeholders of education in Bangladesh will facilitate two-way communication, ensure important feedback and set educational policy on a balanced keel.

Thus, the theory of “the Partnership Approach” emerges from the categories of action, namely the creation of strong institutions to independently conduct the role currently played by the UGC, the practice of incorporating the opinions of various sectors in policymaking, shifting overall policy focus to a facilitation-minded approach, and encouraging open innovation. These policy directions can be broadly grouped into two sets of approaches: increased partnership between the private institutions and public sector, and intensive collaboration among the private institutions themselves. If the higher education sector can embrace these developments, then “the Partnership Approach” can be said to have been successfully adopted.

Table 5. Emergent Theory of “the Partnership Approach” for Bolstering Private Higher Education in Bangladesh.

Categories of Action	Courses of Action	Emergent Theory
Formulate independent bodies for facilitation of higher education institutions	“Partnership” Between Government and Private Institutions	The Partnership Approach
Shift policy focus to facilitation, empowerment and support		
Embrace open innovation	Partnership” within and among Private Institutions	

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study was conducted with a view to exploring the nature of government assistance required for the sustainable progress of private universities. Government participation is a must for the individual development of private universities in the country. This study laid the groundwork for a new paradigm in the government's supportive role for education. In particular, this study provided a novel perspective for policy shaping in Bangladesh's private higher education sector.

In the current context, the private higher education sector was found to be in urgent requirement of government support in three key areas – quality assurance and curriculum definition, research facilitation and faculty development, and foresighted governance approaches. Addressing these issues from a partnership-minded viewpoint can have salutary consequences for the private universities of Bangladesh. Empowered with a holistic approach geared toward facilitation and empowerment from the government's side, the private sector can optimize its contribution to higher education and enhance nation's future prospects.

From a theoretical perspective, the redefinition of the government's role signals a major shift from traditional treatises on the government-university relationship. One such shift has already occurred in the notion and scope of academic freedom, which is now considered to be an important factor for bolstering tertiary education. Future studies can take a more focused approach toward individual areas of policy concerns and devise models for optimizing public-private partnership in the sector.

The “partnership approach” calls for the government to play dual roles – as a regulator and facilitator – for catalyzing development while ensuring conformance. Through proactive policy measures and innovative governance, the government

can facilitate an enabling environment for pursuing institutional and academic excellence and bring immense benefits for our future generations of academia. On the other hand, through smart solutions and sector-wide collaboration in designing, implementing and reviewing these solutions, private tertiary institutions can take the partnership approach to a new level.

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