

DHAKA CENTRAL UNIVERSITY

Promises born out of failures

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*Dhaka Central University housed on campuses of seven colleges earlier affiliated to the University of Dhaka is born out of government failure but with promises, writes **Abu Jar M Akkas***

A UNIVERSITY for students of the seven colleges earlier affiliated to the University of Dhaka raises its head, born out of government failures but with promises. A full sight is still forthcoming. The seven colleges, placed under the National University, founded in 1992, from the custody of the University of Dhaka, placed back under the University of Dhaka in 2017 and the University of Dhaka voicing the cancellation of the affiliation, ran to a proposition that forced the government to found an inter-disciplinary university with the institutions.

A series of events, which included protests, clashes and violence, took place in the meantime. The colleges had been governed by the University of Dhaka before they were placed under the National University. As the National University, an affiliating collegiate university, started faltering with the full load of its about 3.5 million students, students of the seven colleges started to feel the pinch. The best way that time, perhaps, was to attend to the management failures of the National University, now considered the world's second largest university in terms of enrolment.

Whilst the government faltered, the students were, perhaps, unwilling to continue with the collegiate university. The colleges were put back under the University of Dhaka in February 2017 keeping to a 2014 decision that is rumoured to have been born out of a tussle between ranking officials of the state. The decision was to put all of the 279 colleges back under the old public universities. But the seven colleges of Dhaka are the first to have been moved.

The trouble began as soon as the University of Dhaka, which then had students almost double the number that it had in the early 1990s, could not, or did not, attend to the issues of the affiliated colleges. Protests that the students of the seven colleges held caused civic problems, calling the government's attention to the issue. But, almost nothing changed, not until after the changed political context consequent on the July uprising. The trouble resurfaced in October 2024.

Meanwhile in 2024, four colleges — Rajshahi Government College, Government City College, Government Women's College, and New Government Degree College — were put back under the University of Rajshahi and five colleges — Chittagong Government College, Government Haji Muhammad Mohsin College, Sir Ashutosh Government College, Government Commerce College and Satkania Government College — were put back under the University of Chittagong. The placement of the colleges under the University of Rajshahi and the University of Chittagong could not brew into a

problem as grave as it did in Dhaka because despite the placement order, the colleges in Rajshahi and Chittagong still continue under the National University.

In October 2024, the students put forth a demand for a fully-fledged autonomous university for the students of the seven colleges. The institutions are Begum Badrunnessa Government Girls' College, incorporated in 1948 as an intermediate college under Eden College and renamed in 1962 after Eden had gained the second campus at Azimpur, the Dhaka College, founded in 1841 and now located on Mirpur Road, Eden Girls' College, founded in 1873 and now located at Azimpur, the Government Bangla College, founded in 1962 at Mirpur, the Government Shaheed Suhrawardy College, founded in 1949 as Quaid-e-Azam College and later moved to Lakshmibazar and renamed in 1972, Government Titumir College, founded in 1968 as Jinnah College at Mahakhali and renamed in 1971 and Kabi Nazrul Government College, founded in 1874 at Muhsinia Madrassah and renamed in 1972 after a series of changes.

The inter-disciplinary university, as the type of the institution suggests, should have a dynamic academic approach, combining knowledge and methods from various fields. But, as it has been decided that the Dhaka Central University would start functioning as soon as possible, with seven campuses spanning across the capital city, the state of being inter-disciplinary has been narrowed down a little. The university, with its administrative building envisaged somewhere in central Dhaka, will also have a teacher-student centre, an auditorium and a health centre. But, the university will run its classes on the seven campuses where all but two institutions, Eden Girls' College and Government Titumir College, run higher secondary education.

Eden College discontinued higher secondary education in the academic session of 1995–1996 and Titumir College, which founded as a college offering bachelor's degree, started running higher secondary education in 1968, which was discontinued in the academic session of 1998–1999. The structure of the new university is planned to harm in no way the higher secondary education in the institutions. There are also plans to re-introduce higher secondary education in both Eden Girls' College and the Government Titumir College, with dual purposes of expanding the scope of higher secondary education and to place some of the teachers who may need to be transferred elsewhere after the university takes over bachelor's and master's courses in the institutions.

The university will offer disciplines of applied mathematics, zoology, data science, biochemistry and biotechnology in the Dhaka College, physics, applied chemistry, botany and forensic science in Eden Girls' College and psychology and environmental science in Badrunnessa College under the school of science. Under the school of arts and humanities, the university will offer disciplines of journalism and

communication studies, development studies, economics, film studies and international politics in Bangla College. The school of business will offer disciplines of accounting, human resource management, hotel and hospitality management, marketing and sales, and bank and insurance management in Titumir College. The school of law and justice will offer the discipline of law in Kabi Nazrul College and criminology in Suhrawardy College.

The authorities working on the structure of the university and the legislation that would govern the institution have opted for the word 'school' instead of 'faculty' as it would have no deans. They have also opted for the word 'discipline,' avoiding the word 'department,' as there would be no head or chair of the department. The schools will, however, have heads and the disciplines will have coordinators. The university will only use the infrastructure of the colleges, which will hold classes from 7:00am to 12 noon, between 1:00pm and 7:00pm, on conditions that higher secondary students could use, if they would need to, any university infrastructure created on the campuses.

Protesters against the university plan, who include teachers now working in the colleges, students now doing their bachelor's, or, perhaps, master's, course in the colleges and even students now doing their higher secondary but willing to compete for a seat in the university once they complete the higher secondary education, have thrown enough of tantrums and put forth a number of demands backed by arguments that are mostly ungrounded.

The teachers demand that the government should not place the assets of the college under the university and should not change the emblems of the institutions. The students of both the categories have expressed similar concern. But they fail to understand, or conveniently ignore the fact, that the colleges own the infrastructure of the institutions. The university will use the infrastructure based on an understanding, making certain that higher secondary education is in no way harmed and any infrastructure such as laboratories that the university might create would leave, in case needed, the college students with access to.

Both the teachers and students of the colleges appear opposed to the introduction of disciplines that are not now taught in the institutions and to the discontinuation of any subjects that are taught. The misunderstanding lies in the fact that the university, on the one hand, and the colleges, on the other hand, are two different entities, with none overlapping the other in academic activities or administration. But, there is a catch. As the university will be teaching applied subjects, there would certainly be some changes in the constitution of the disciplines or subjects.

The university will teach its students school-based disciplines in the first four semesters. The second four semesters will focus on specialisation geared to intensified studies in the master's course. The

university would also be offering students taking up some discipline at the time of admission to switch to other disciplines in the third year provided that the discipline is taught in the school on the same campus. Students, for instance, taking admission to applied physics in the first year will be studying biochemistry in Dhaka College for two years and they could switch to biotechnology in the third year if they would want to, leaving them with scope for understanding what they intended to study during admission but for studying another discipline if they would start liking it more than the discipline intended. Up to 40 per cent of the classes would be held online and the rest and the examinations would be held offline, easing pressure on the college infrastructure.

The appointment of the vice-chancellor, the pro-vice-chancellor and the treasurer would be made through a search committee that the commission would institute when required. Whilst the tenure of the vice-chancellor, the pro-vice-chancellor and the treasurer will run for four years, none can hold the position for more than two tenures. Heads of schools cannot, however, hold the position for two consecutive tenures. The teachers holding the functional positions in the university administration would need to leave any office of profit or position in the teachers' association that they might hold.

The teachers of the colleges, who are BCS officers of the education cadre, some of whom were earlier rumoured to be demanding the ranking positions of the university, along with college students standing against a seemingly narrowing down of the scope of higher secondary education as an excuse, as is evident from their charter of demands, should know that the education ministry would reopen higher secondary education in Eden and Titumir colleges so that close to three-fourths of the college teachers but the ones who would be working with the university, could be accommodated there.

The colleges, all offering bachelor's and master's courses, have three types of teachers: some teach only higher secondary courses, some teach both higher secondary and tertiary education while some others teach only tertiary education — bachelor's and master's. The university plans to hire the teachers who teach tertiary courses as teachers of the university but through a due process, with a priority, perhaps, but with no automatic migration. The proposed university could also offer the students of the courses now still under the University of Dhaka because of the earlier affiliation to opt for the certificates from the new university.

This is, perhaps, the most pressing concern that the teachers of the colleges are worried about. They are reported to be staying 'money-magically' with the colleges year after year, without being transferred that they should have been, allegedly having grown tentacles in the form of coaching business. With the majority of teachers being placed under the colleges for higher secondary

education, some being put under the university through an appropriate selection process and, yet, some being transferred should resolve the crisis.

The structure of the Dhaka Central University resembles, not very closely though, some other foreign universities: the University of New England, Durham University, the University of Oxford, the University of Cambridge, the Chinese University of Hong Kong, the National University of Singapore and Lund University. A University Grants Commission official having closely worked on the proposed university has said that this is the best that they could work out to resolve the crisis of the students of the seven colleges. In the event of failures, the students might be sent back under the National University, which appears, and has always appeared, to be the best way to improve the National University governance, resolve the crisis of the seven colleges and advance the cause of the students of more than 2,250 colleges that are affiliated to the National University for tertiary education.

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