

## Education For All

The concept of education and its link to a country's standard of living is one to which we subscribe. To this end, the government took up an ambitious scheme for introducing free and compulsory primary education, especially for girls whose educational needs have always been grossly neglected. Unfortunately, due to its financial constraints, this programme is still to "take-off" in that it still far from being "universal" in its truest sense. Forced cuts in spending on education especially at the higher level has resulted in a renewed focus on private education. By shifting the burden of the cost of education to the parents and guardians, particularly at the higher levels, it is hoped that the aims of the country will be achieved.

To this end the setting up of the privately sponsored universities is in keeping with the present policy of encouraging private initiative in the education sector. Already several private universities are functioning and reportedly around half a dozen more are now awaiting clearance from the relevant authorities. But, although all the new proposals meet the requirements of the Private University Act 1992, the authorities are delaying permission pending the report of the Education Policy Formation Committee set up by the government to review the country's education policy.

Thousands of students fail to gain admission in public universities due to the shortage of seats, but whether setting up more private universities is the right answer to the present conundrum is yet to be established. Certainly some students are taking admission in these universities. According to reports, some 3000 students are now studying at these private seats of learning. But how many more potential students there may be who cannot gain admission simply because they are unable to afford the high fees being charged is not known.

Such universities of course cannot be brushed aside, for they are filling a demand by a certain class of people and, as they are certainly more secure than the public universities. Those who can afford the high fees therefore, prefer to have their children here. Besides they do offer a wide choice of curricula as prepared by the experts who have kept in view the needs of the modern world. The standard of education is also reasonably high when compared to that of the public universities and, perhaps of greater importance, courses are on schedule and free of the horror of "session-jams". The plus points are all on the side of these private universities.

As these universities appear to be doing a good job in imparting a need-based modern education, it is better if the present system is not disturbed, at least until it has been in vogue long enough to assess its suitability. In the belief that more private universities should be allowed to function until this assessment takes place, there should be no delay in granting permission to those that meet the required specifications. However all proposals must also be seen within the concept of the need to privatise education further and, as the private sector universities have proved to be effective at introducing better and more pragmatic education it may be the answer we are looking for in the absence of any up-to-date learning in the public facilities.

As the need for investing in a modern line of education relevant to the needs of a fast-developing technical environment catches up with us, what people expect to gain from education must now be more carefully studied. People who seriously plan for their children's future have already learned the futility of looking for a university in the public sector equal to those in the private. The path higher education is taking in this country is exceedingly clear. Therefore, under such conditions, the planning of the nation's new educational policy will be no easy task especially with the number of economic pressures on the government to cut back on spending for education.

It is imperative that we understand that education is an investment which yields "wealth," empowering the human resource with better life-skills to contribute more towards progress. We should therefore concentrate our efforts in providing education not only for the rich but for every single child in Bangladesh.