

University Governance under Attack!

Let university administration come to closer scrutiny by the parliament so that revisions could be injected if and when needed. Bangladesh universities need to be relatively more outward looking than they happened to be so far.

THE administration of universities, at least in our part of the world, has long been subject to severe criticisms. We are accused of grooming a style of governance that hardly goes to cater to the needs of modern-day university education. Back home, I have also to bear some of the brunt of the arguments against our university administration since — fortunately or unfortunately — I happen to be a part and parcel of my university administration. But travelling to Europe, I am surprised to see that allegations against universities for their dismal performance also know no bounds.

In an article published recently a member of the European Parliament — Mr. Linder — takes a closer and albeit critical look at the factors that contribute to the growing failures of the European universities vis-a-vis American universities. (Herald Tribune, 15 January 1999). According to the author, the most dangerous weakness of Europe lies in its ailing universities and their dwindling competitiveness. Compared to what is available in this part of the globe, the US has the world's leading industries — from high tech to fast food and from Wall Street to Hollywood — as well as some of the best citadels of learning e.g. Harvard, Stanford, Chicago. "If you know the names of Sorbonne, Heidelberg and Bologna," says Linder, "it is because you are a cultivated person" And in the search for the reasons as to why majority of the Nobel Laureates come from the US, Linder lands with more than one reasons. But he ranks the system of governance as the prominent one.

As I glance through his arguments, I find some similarities in the realm of university governance between Bangladesh and Europe. Quite akin to our system (and in sharp contrast to that of the US), Euro Universities are

parts of a monolithic, government-run national system. Allegedly, these institutions suffer from a lack of clear-cut intents and initiatives to do better, to grow competitive and to derive the best out of tax payers' penny. On the contrary, because of the diversities in governance, the private and non-profit American universities tend to enjoy more freedom and are engaged in competition and takes tax-payers' pains seriously.

In Bangladesh, the chief executive of the university is called Vice-Chancellor (VC) Here in Europe, he/she is called a Rector. Rectors in European universities are not appointed (or dismissed) by the university board "but typically are chosen through politicized process in which colleagues, students and non-academic staff vote on a nominating list from which the government makes its choice.... To be a Rector requires an accommodating spirit rather than entrepreneurial ability". In Bangladesh also, barring very few exceptions, you probably need more ballots than merits for a becoming VC. The entrepreneurial sagacity, allegedly, is submerged by the supremacy of the ballots.

But then some subtle differences between Bangladesh and Europe are in sight. In Europe, for example, "university boards are usually made up of political appointments, curricula are decided by the parliament. The rector and board are not free to establish new departments, professors are not created by university board but by the ministry of education. The system for making faculty appointments are heavily regulated. Faculty salaries are determined through government

decrees and longevity matters more than merits... Academic freedom does involve freedom of thought but not freedom to take action." Not at all happy with what is happening in the name of university governance, the critics of the system seem to argue that "in this kind of environment, new ideas are not rewarded. There is need to persuade not just the rather impotent board, but also professors who are as keen on privilege as any other trade union member. If the great industrial corporations were to appoint their chief executives the way European universities do, they would all soon be out-competitive and have to close down. European universities are surely being out-competitive but they do not go bankrupt. The public coffers are still open and students do not have much choice". Admittedly, Bangladeshi universities enjoy relatively more freedom in the area of various selections, curricula development and financial matters than those of European universities.

Tony Blair's proposal to introduce tuition fees in universities is considered by some quarters as discrimination against the poor. "Complacent professors and political ideologues may declare that universities are different — that they cannot be looked upon as vulgar business". Accepting the argument as true, Linder asks universities to raise standard and be competitive so that they can beat American universities.

There are arguments on both sides of the aisle: elected vs. selected executive for the universities. Our experiences tend to show that universities where selected VCs are posted, are performing (even better (even worse) than those with elected VCs at the helm of university affairs.



Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes

much democracy" as prevailing now in the campuses as opposed to "too little or no democracy" on the other side of the fence. Our founding fathers presented to us 1973 Act with the basic assumption that we would not make misuse of the rights and obligations enshrined in the Act and thus create an academic environment that breeds democratic norms and along with that a productive education system. But unfortunately, we do not seem to have lived up to the expectations of our founding fathers. We are frequently blamed for lowering our academic standards, involving too much in group politics and using our students as "stooges" to grab power. This kind of specific allegations are not generally found in the cases of European universities. However, after 26 years of its existence, an evaluation of the system is, probably, overdue to see whether the Act helped us to grow competitive and contribute to the socio-economic and technological uplift of the society for which three million people laid their lives in 1971.

Universities are breeding grounds of future leadership of a nation. If that ground fails to grasp the changing needs of the society within which it has to perform and of the globe of which it is a part, we are doomed to fail in ensuring a better society that the founding fathers of the Act dreamt of. Let university administration come to closer scrutiny by the parliament so that revisions could be injected if and when needed. Bangladesh universities need to be relatively more outward looking than they happened to be so far. Let us step into the next millennium with a newer vision for the universities.