

Open University

Plans for open university in Bangladesh which have been under active consideration for some time are reported by the Minister for Education to have advanced further, and we may expect the scheme to be put into operation in the near future.

The open university, rightly run, will serve a useful purpose in creating opportunities for further education for those who for one reason or another cannot join the existing universities and colleges as regular students but who are anxious to improve themselves intellectually. But were it to be regarded as a mere means of increasing the number of graduates it will add to the country's headache by flooding the market with unemployed young men and women demanding jobs on the basis of paper qualifications without real value. The number of graduates that our colleges and universities turn out annually, low undoubtedly in proportion to the size of the population, is high enough in the sense that many of them can lay claim to nothing by way of real knowledge in any technical subject. No one would want this to be duplicated.

We are glad that it is proposed initially to lay stress, in the open university curriculum, on scientific and technical subjects. Here again we hope that the highest possible standards will be aimed at so that those who earn its degrees may have the satisfaction of learning something useful to themselves as well as to the nation. The great danger in our country is that in spite of occasional criticism about the decline in the standard of higher education, a university or college is apt to be judged by the number of students who successfully pass its examinations. A high proportion of failure is thought to be a reflection of the weakness of its syllabuses rather than of the low intellectual calibre of its students.

Not only the universities and colleges but also the boards of secondary education are called upon, every year after the publication of the results of their examination, to modify their examination systems realistically. This plea, urged by the failed candidates and sections of the public, has already led to the elimination of supposedly difficult parts of the syllabus and also resulted in examiners being instructed to mark papers leniently. Leniency however has not satisfied the hunger for easy degrees; many candidates are not prepared to leave matters to the judgement of their examiners; they insist on cheating openly and unashamedly.

We apprehend that unless precautions are taken right from the beginning and the true object of an open university properly explained, there will be many to imagine that its usefulness must be measured by its quantitative output.

There is another danger to which we might as well draw attention. Those recruited to run the open university should beware of following the example of university teachers who treat the departments they preside over or manage as empires which must be constantly expanded regardless of the quality of students they attract. It is this process which has witnessed the transformation of International Relations, Journalism, Applied Physics and Applied Chemistry, to cite a few instances, into subjects for study at the undergraduate level, whereas those responsible for their introduction were clear in their minds that they could be taken up at the post-graduate level only after students had acquired

knowledge in the basic elements of a sound education. This is a distinction between undergraduate & post-graduate study insisted upon in the academic world everywhere else.

The mechanism of an open university necessarily differs from that of an ordinary university. After Britain, Pakistan is the only country, to the best of our knowledge, which has been successfully running open university courses. We hope the assistance of these countries will be available in the organisation of the new institution. Nothing should be attempted in a hurry. Nor should we allow the objects we have in view to be obscured or subverted by raising false expectations. A cautious beginning will save a great deal of future trouble.