

## Academic Certificates On Sale At Some Private Universities?

Newspapers have frequently reported that some private universities are selling certificates at a price. These so-called universities are not only encouraging fraud, offering distasteful education for which purpose students do not have to attend any courses, is clearly dishonest. If certificates from these universities can be bought like any other commercial commodity, what are we teaching our children? Although this kind of news should shock all our sensibilities, more often than not it doesn't because the need for a piece of paper is too important for a job seeker.

As we recall, we had touched on this subject earlier this year at a time when the annual report of the University Grants Commission (UGC) had been published showing a number of private universities had set up outer campus without permission and were, in addition, selling certificates to those with the right amount of money to buy. As there was no outcry, the news was passed by. Yet we had noted that in accordance with the Private University Act (amendment 1998), before seeking permission for opening an outer campus, it was mandatory for the university to fulfil all necessary conditions relating to academic, financial and infrastructural facilities on the main campus. The UGC Chairman had categorically stated that eight private universities were involved with setting up such outer campuses without its approval or that of the education ministry. As no action was ever taken against these universities, the UGC would be justified in raising this issue again.

Although the government needs to encourage the growth of private centres of higher learning, no one can be allowed to bend the rules. Private institutions can only be set up if they meet all the appropriate standards and if they are run with the greatest efficiency thus the establishment of the special committee to investigate into the affairs of private universities was justified but it was only a first step along the way. Ensuring the quality of education in the country is important but if nothing comes from this exercise in integrity its value is undermined. What is far worse in our opinion is the rise of the bogey of profit making, but if profit making is the true motive, the owners of private universities should invest in other commercial enterprises. Education is, and has always been, a non-profit holistic endeavour.

Strengthening the government's regulatory function is very relevant and the authorities must give exemplary punishment to any owner found indulging in selling certificates for personal gain. One university was reported to be giving out an MBA certificate without a student appearing at an examination. Such allegations must be investigated as, if no one is taken, it will be a blot on the country's conscience. If still no action is taken, civil society and other social organisations must come forward to launch a movement against the practice as it is only social resistance that will be effective against this vice.

As the standard of education in private universities has been discussed at various levels for many years, we do not propose to touch on this here. However we must emphasise at this point that not all universities are guilty of the charge levelled at some and several can be compared to any modern university in the world. That being so, this may be the only consolation we can cling to in an otherwise unhappy situation but as the UGC says these too are lacking in teaching staff, our satisfaction may be short-lived. But much depends on the UGC as it has a responsibility to the people to monitor the activities of private universities, both academic and financial. In addition to this it has a responsibility to encourage the building up of a self-regulatory system but the greatest importance right now is - if the UGC Chairmen have irrefutable evidence that some private universities are selling certificates, appropriate action must be taken against them.