



Quality in Higher Education: Bangladesh Perspective

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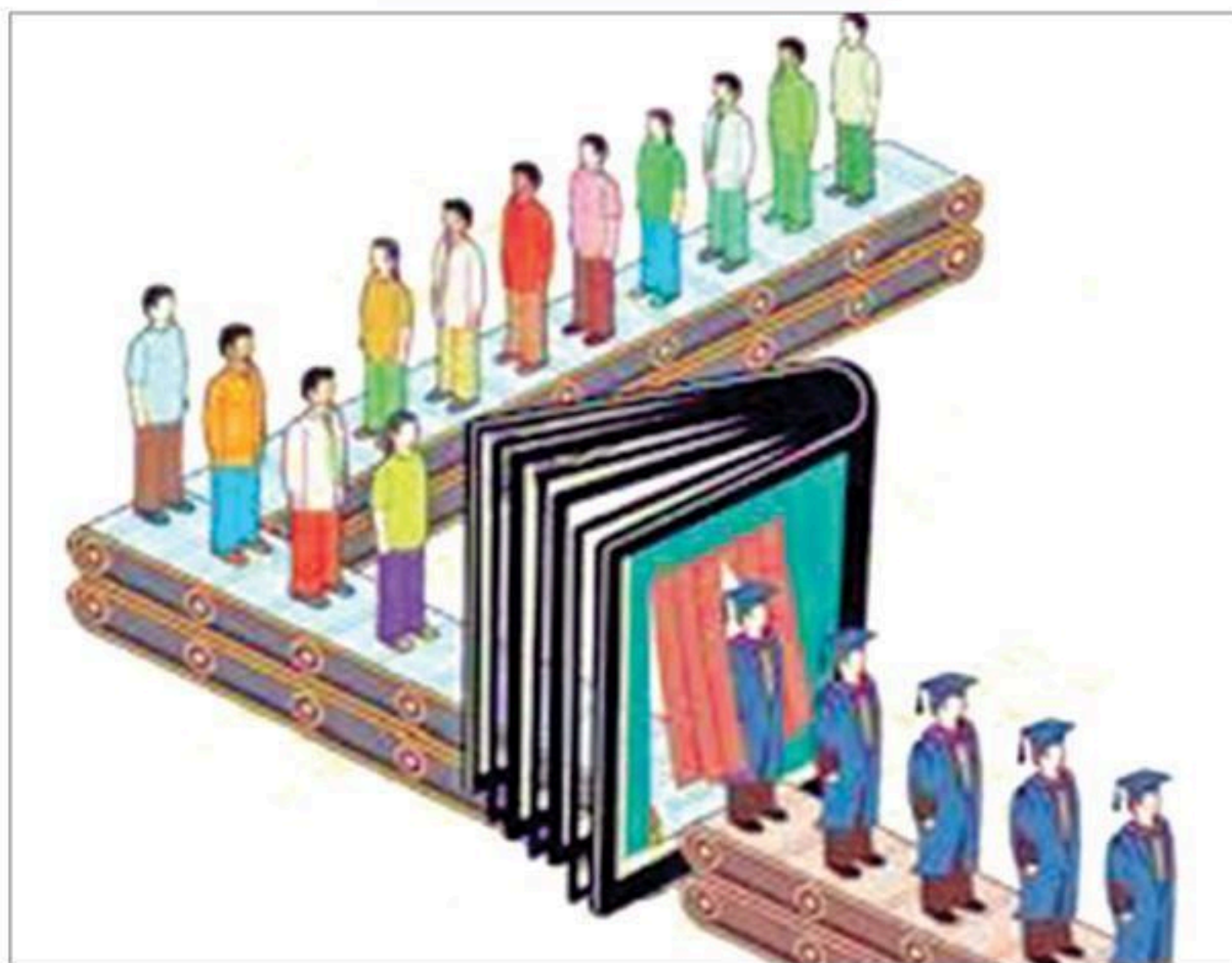
THERE is much discussion these days about quality in higher education (HE) in Bangladesh. But the academics and education specialists do not clearly explain what quality means and why it is needed in the higher education setting. We are experiencing more of a cacophony of speech rather than a conversation about quality. Higher education is recognised today as a capital investment and is of paramount importance for economic and social development of the country (Barnet, 1990).

Bangladesh is set to be a middle income country by 2021. To achieve that status the country needs highly skilled workforce equipped with innovative and creative abilities. In 2015 a total of 577,087 students passed in HSC exam which has increased to 899,150 in 2017. Every year a high percentage of HSC passed students is going to universities to pursue higher studies. This means that Bangladesh needs to invest right now in the human capital of its young people if it wants to reap the benefits of a large demographic dividend.

Students will now require such educations that can prepare them to adapt to multiple careers over the course of their working lives. Universities in Bangladesh have to be institutionally responsive to long-term shifts in the job market while serving students with a broad range of professional aspirations. For this, quality in higher education is being discussed so much. But there are so many different opinions on how to understand quality and how to measure it. Therefore, understanding of quality in HE and adopting quality principles and methods are very important for both academics and other stakeholders particularly education policymakers as it will affect the higher education culture. In the words of Brent Ruben, from Rutgers University, USA: 'How we think about excellence has fundamental implications for illuminating and reconciling differences in perspective and priority within the academy.'

Truly speaking quality is an elusive concept. We all have an instinctive understanding of what it means but it is difficult to articulate. Quality is also a value-laden term: It is subjectively associated with that which is good and worthwhile. Given the difficulties in defining quality in higher education, some have opted out of trying to find an underlying theory or definition. Vroeijenstijn (1991) says, 'It is a waste of time to try to define quality. The basis of this argument is that quality is a relative concept, that different interest groups or stakeholders in higher education have different priorities and their focus of attention may be different.' For example, students and lecturers in tertiary education primarily show interest in

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the educational process, while employers might be more interested on the outputs of higher education. There is, therefore, no unitary concept about quality. In reality an institution may be of high quality in relation to one factor but low quality in relation to another.

Five popular ways to frame the issue of quality in HE are (Becket & Brookes, 2008) (Murad & Rajesh, 2010) : (i) Quality as exceptional (e.g. higher standards), (ii) Quality as consis-

tency (e.g. zero defects), (iii) Quality as fitness for purpose (e.g. fitting customer specifications), (iv) Quality as value for money (e.g. efficiency and effectiveness), and (v) Quality as transformative (e.g. ongoing process to take action and enhancement of customer satisfaction, which include empowerment).

The foremost task of a university is to revitalise its academic system from the perspective of purpose and requirement by taking into considera-

tion of three dimensions of quality in higher education: The *meritocratic* (the institution's conformity to professional and scholarly norms with academic professionals as a reference group), the *social* (the degree to which an institution satisfies the needs of important collective constituents), and the *individualistic* (the contribution the institution makes to the personal growth of students). Quality in general should satisfy customers needs, and continuously keep on performing its functions as required by customers as per agreed upon standards. However, higher education is not a product in industrial sense; rather it is a 'service'. Higher education is service-oriented and goal-oriented.

Starting with 6 public universities in 1971 today there are a total of 38 public universities and 93 private universities in the country. Though a good number of universities have been established in forty six years, but our higher education institutions are not held in high esteem. Bangladesh has many problems such as, (i) even the best universities of Bangladesh do not appear in the global ranking; (ii) quality variations among universities are very substantial, (iii) private universities have serious teacher shortage, (iv) public universities are preservationists and reluctant to shift existing traditional education system to an ability driven education system which can produce higher-level employment skilled smart graduates, (v) no agencies to monitor universities' performances, (vi) heavy involvement of teachers in public universities with other professions, (vii) lack of understanding of the current state of education quality, (viii) faculty motivation is also low, etc. Many private universities of the country run academic programmes in small rented buildings and have failed to create an academic environment. Education researchers pointed out that the present higher system employs rote memorisation approach rather than critical thinking by students. There is no research university in Bangladesh. Universities in Bangladesh are basically teaching universities. At this stage one of the means to achieve 'quality education' is through 'quality teaching' in order to ensure it meets the expectations of students and the requirements of employers, both today and for the future. This can be achieved through continuous upgrading in pedagogy, use of technologies, assessment models aligned with student-centred learning, creating of innovative learning platforms and also assessing impacts and documenting effectiveness of the teaching delivered.

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