

## **What I learned as Chair of Economics Department**

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From September 2016 to April 2019, I served as Chair of Department of Economics at a leading private university. In my resume, I did not have an administrator position. So, I happily accepted the position without realizing just how much of a desk job it is. I gained valuable insights which as a regular faculty member are difficult to attain.

I have had a long-standing relationship with private universities since their inception in 1992. I started as an undergraduate student, which followed by being a graduate student and a teaching assistant. After a 15-year absence, I rejoined a private university as a faculty member. The spectacular rise of private universities in Bangladesh unfolded before my eyes.

I felt compelled to write about my experience as a chair to provide a glimpse of the challenges that private universities face. I hope my peers at other private universities will be encouraged to talk openly about their own experiences. Here are eight points that summarize my experience as a chair.

First, students are often blamed for poor performance. But rarely we question our teachers about the adequacy of their teaching methods. Exams (midterms and final alike) are only one method of assessing students. Many students perform unsatisfactorily in traditional closed-book exams, but they do very well in other forms of assessment such as class presentation, making short videos on field trips, and debating ideas in groups. We have found that a portfolio of assessment methods does a superb job in stimulating students learning.

Second, contextualized teaching help students to master the subject quickly. For example, when lecturing exchange rates, it is better to use dollar-taka or rupee-taka examples, rather than the dollar-yen or dollar-pound examples that are ubiquitous in western textbooks. Books on development economics are filled with familiar examples of poverty around the world, that's why students find them easy to read. Similarly, teachers should do the extra work of relating concepts with local examples, whenever applicable. Not all teachers do that because this requires additional effort.

Third, teachers should be morally responsible for the employability of their graduates. Less than one-quarter of students go for postgraduate degrees. Yet, a bulk of the curriculum is designed with outdated models and theories that do not build skills needed for the job. The University Grant Commission (UGC) must take a lead to encourage universities and the industry to develop curriculums that serve the dual purpose of society and economy.

Fourth, today's students seem oblivious to their rights and duties. Most students hesitate to ask questions, even when language is not a barrier. Some students prefer asking questions after the class has ended, depriving others of learning from the question. Questioning is a great way to become open minded and doubt free, among other benefits. Sadly, when the tight-lipped student asks a question, often it concerns the type of questions to appear in the exam.

Fifth, parents are not well aware of the 3-semester a year system that is typical in most private universities. Starting from the deadline for financial aid, whether to drop or withdraw a course,

and retaking courses—being misinformed about these issues have costly financial implications. Parents rarely inquire about placements of recent graduates in job, including the time to get the first job, average starting salary, etc. When parents raise their views about the return on costly investment they are making, private universities will be in better condition.

Sixth, Steve Jobs once said: “It doesn’t make sense to hire smart people and tell them what to do; we hire smart people so they can tell us what to do.” Indeed, it is the polar opposite at private universities. They hire capable Deans and Chairs, but do not allow them to make decisions. At York University, Canada, where I have studied, Deans make all major decisions including hiring and firing. While senior administrators like Vice Chancellor work on research funding and external collaboration. Our private universities would benefit from a similar model based on decentralization.

Seventh, private universities were established to absorb hundreds of thousands of students who could not find a seat in public universities. Many of these students would otherwise go abroad for higher study. Private universities are therefore saving the country’s precious foreign exchange, among other contributions. Unlike public universities, the teaching load is heavier at private universities. There is simply not enough time for scholarly research. However, when it comes to promotion in private universities, research carries a considerable weight, which is counterintuitive. This is an area that will require very careful thinking.

Eight, our society makes a big fuss about ownership of education providers. Many still believe that students can buy grades in private universities. Some of my students reported bullying by their own parents and relatives compared to their siblings or cousins who are students of public universities. Although unfortunate, private universities have been slow to change this perception. They have a lot of homework to be done through systematic liaison with the private sector so that their value is recognized.

Towards the end of my service as Chair, a big realization I had was the dichotomy between an educator and an academic economist. Although this is partly self-damaging, I wonder how useful academic economists are—who spend their time on class preparation, lectures, meetings, conversations with students and peers, emailing, and other housekeeping—to address real life social and economic problems. Until academicians take an interest in involving themselves in real world problems, higher education will not serve society well.

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