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Role of Bangabandhu in expanding higher education and Bangladesh today

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Abstract. The study attempts to evaluate the role of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the Founding Father of Bangladesh, in his initial plan on higher education and to produce adequate human resources to rebuild the country since independence. Secondary sources of information are used to evaluate his role in higher education expansion in Bangladesh. It has been revealed that the economic growth and development seen in Bangladesh today was largely impacted by his education plan.

Keywords: Bangabandhu, Bangladesh, Higher Education, Human Resources.

JEL: A14, A21, I20, I25

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1. Introduction

The founding Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, realised the importance of education and human resource development from the very beginning of the independent state of Bangladesh. As a consequence, education was identified as one of the top priorities for all sectors in providing an important basis for nation building. In 2020, Bangladesh celebrated its 49th victory day and it is now time to remember our great leader as we appreciate the huge impact his education policy has had on the overall development of the country.

The paper reviews literature systematically and briefly outlines his higher education policy and its impact on our country's society and the economy as a whole. Available secondary sources of information are used to analyse selected research hypotheses. The following points are highlighted:

- 1.1 Development of a higher education policy
- 1.2 Growth of higher education
- 1.3 Opportunities of higher education and human resource development
- 1.4 The need for quality education



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1.5 The role of Bangladeshi expatriates for improving the quality of education and overall nation building

1.1. Development of a higher education policy

In 1971, after a nine-month war of liberation, Bangladesh became independent and the Father of the Nation quickly took a firm decision in order to build the country. It was a big challenge as there were very limited resources but, despite this, reconstruction of the infrastructure, recruiting skilled people for working in public administration, fixing the economy and health and, above all, education received the highest importance in his initial state planning. It was his plan to eradicate illiteracy and poverty from Bangladesh by building a productive nation through the means of proper education and training. He created a national education policy on 26 July 1971 and gave responsibility for devising the plans to Dr. Muhammed Qudrat-i-Khuda. After two years of intensive work, an education and training policy report was published on 30th May 1974 that provided guidelines on how to build a nation and develop its skilled human resources. Action was also taken to reform the higher education sector and through a government order (University Act 1973 which is also known as the Ordinance of '73). There were six public universities at that time in Bangladesh. Four general and two specialised type. The 1973 Act does not apply to all universities. It is applicable to only four general universities namely Dhaka University, Rajshahi University, Jahangirnagar University a Chittagong University. Under this Act, universities were given autonomy to govern and developing creative teaching and learning, and for gearing up innovative academic research activities. In order to directly support the higher education sector, a University Grants Commission (UGC) was established on 16th December 1972 under the auspices of the Ministry of Education, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh. The UGC evaluated the demands of multipurpose education that would be required for the development of the country and to approve the curriculum so that money was well utilised. Over the last five decades, the UGC has performed tremendous work in higher education, not only with financing but also with horizontal and vertical expansion of the higher education sector as well as monitoring the governance of public and private universities. The Commission has also played an important role in providing appropriate training for academic staff through scholarships and arranging regular teacher training workshops. Due to all these efforts, we now see a gradual improvement in classroom teaching, in ICT and internet use, in facilities for blended learning, and in research publications. In 2010, in order to meet the demands of the modern world, the government proposed renaming the UGC as the Higher Education Commission of Bangladesh making it similar to other countries. Directly after independence, the Father of the Nation provided access to higher education for all people in our society by the means of low tuition fees that enabled a huge number of students to have opportunities in higher education that has continued to this day. As an example, the enrolment into tertiary education increased from 11.77% in 1999 to 47.72% in 2009¹. This is projected to increase as the population increases and has helped many to get



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jobs within the country and to go abroad. Those living outside Bangladesh play an important role in nation building by also co-operating and investing in the country.

1.2. Growth of higher education

As already mentioned, the higher education sector has developed both horizontally and vertically over the last 49 years. The current Sheikh Hasina Government has a plan to support higher education and to build at least one public university in every district of the country. This is a highly ambitious plan especially for a developing country like Bangladesh but is possible for a leader who has a clear plan for the future. Since Independence, the growth of every university has increased many times in terms of size and infrastructure and successive governments have increased the budgets for achieving it. In order to make education accessible to as many people as possible, the government gave permission for the establishment of private universities in areas where there were no public universities at all. This seems to be a good plan for investing money in the higher education sector that will create employment opportunities all over the country. Private universities play an important role in the country's economy by providing education and services but with their introduction, the 1990s saw a policy shift towards neoliberalism in the higher education sector². The country is gathering experience of running both public and private universities with the main objective to broaden access to higher education in order to meet the demand of secondary graduates. Currently, Bangladesh has 46 public and 107 private universities. Except 1973 Act, other public university is being run by its own Act, while private universities operate under the Private University Act 1992. Critics argue that "From the beginning, the private universities were alleged to do business rather than ensure the standard of higher education for students" (Kabir, p161)². The UGC has been strictly monitoring all activities of the private universities in the country.

1.3 Opportunities of higher education and human resource development

A substantial proportion of the population in Bangladesh are young with around 40% aged between 18 and 29 years. A significant cohort of this group are aged between 15 and 24 that will continue to grow in the coming years, and they will need access to adequate education and training. The Government of Bangladesh is aware of this demographic dividend and plans to establish the right policies to maintain sustainable economic growth to the benefit of the country. As well as providing every educational opportunity via public and private institutions for the young population as per demand, the government has also created job opportunities. Many NGO activities started in Bangladesh immediately after independence in 1971 and during most of the 1970s, NGOs provided various services including education, health and sanitation and family planning³. There are many success stories around the activities of the NGO sector as it can offer huge employment opportunities for Bangladeshi graduates. International NGOs are always on the lookout for skilled individuals compared to local ones and many people have taken advantage of opportunities outside the country either for higher education or employment. Bangladeshi students studying outside the country are successfully completing their courses and representing their country with pride. In recent years there has been a growth of remittance back into Bangladesh partly due to skilled Bangladeshi educated people living outside the country. However, most of our migrant workers are unskilled and get very low salaries and it is now time to think about this situation. Our policymakers



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must put an emphasis on learning English as an international language and to provide technical training at all levels of the higher education sector. In this way we can build a productive nation and reduce unemployment problem in the country.

1.4 The need for quality education

It is broadly well-known that the higher education sector has played an important role in producing a large number of graduates over the last five decades. However, those graduates face tremendous challenges when they start new jobs that might not have any connection with their learning. This means that in spite of having a university education, it does not help them contribute effectively in the workplace environment. This may lead some to think that it was a complete waste of their time and resources and as many do not find jobs that match their education, they quickly become unemployed. These are challenging issues that need urgent attention and reform as soon as possible. For example, the academic curriculum should be designed as per the requirements of the changing nature of the current job market and we need to prepare graduates so that they are able to handle challenges in the workplace. Universities need to participate in global rankings such as the QS and The Times Higher Education (THE) ranking lists. Employers generally prefer graduates from ranking universities when they are hiring employees and we cannot completely ignore this aspect living as we do in a global community. Universities need to work closely with industry and multi-national companies and launch apprenticeship programmes. In practice, such programmes would enable our talented graduates to quickly develop their skills to fit the needs of their particular workplace environment. Policymakers should therefore think seriously about how to produce more skilled people from the higher education sector all over the country. This would help to quickly solve our unemployment rate and generate a skilled workforce for the nation. It is also time now to think about the quality of education rather than the quantity of graduates.

1.5 The Role of Bangladeshi expatriates for improving the quality of education and overall nation building

A huge number of expatriates that received their initial education inside Bangladesh now live outside the country and many of them work in the higher education sectors in developed countries. These people can be in regular contact with the Bangladesh Embassies and play an important role in the capacity building of the country and would be happy to contribute without any consultancy fee or other benefit. Some of them would be happy to take a visiting professorship position and reconnect with Bangladesh that could help to build a bridge between Bangladeshi academic staff and expatriates. Such activity would enable young graduates to get scholarships and provide opportunities to enter further education as well as to publish joint articles. Universities themselves could build partnerships with foreign universities and conduct joint projects. This would all help in building relationships with experts, in improving the academic environment and quality of education, and above all establish partnerships and linkages with foreign universities. The development of joint academic programmes between Universities in Bangladesh and those in other countries would benefit our graduates a great deal in their careers and enable them to earn decent salaries that are comparable to other countries. We have many examples around us such as Malaysia, Sri Lanka and



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even China. All our investment should be put into graduates, so that we can give back to society in many ways.

2. Conclusion

The benefits provided by higher education are enormous and multifaceted in the development of our country. The Father of the Nation laid the foundations of it at the very start of independence and during his short life he gave people a dream for Bangladesh and a plan to build the nation with pride and dignity. He also faced the cancer of corruption in society and mentioned it clearly without hesitation but unfortunately, today it is seen that some of the university graduates are involved with huge corruption when they should be genuinely contributing to society. The overall development of the country could perhaps have been more visible to people if by any means corruption could have been avoided at every level. It is not too late to eliminate corruption in the society by remembering the sacrifice of our 30 lacs martyrs in 1971 and, of course, our beloved Father of the Nation “Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman”. Finally, let’s work together and try to build a better Bangladesh.

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