Contribution of HEQEP in Ensuring Quality Education at Higher Level in Bangladesh: A Political Economy Perspective

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Abstract

Education is a very influential factor for development of a nation. For this, it needs quality education and to ensure it interrelationship among the factors of education is very crucial. This paper explores the contribution of Higher Education Quality Enhancement Project (HEQEP) in ensuring quality education at higher level in Bangladesh. Precisely, it tries to find out the answer of the questions: To what extent HEQEP contributes to quality education development in Bangladesh and what has it brought impact on education governance to ensure quality education in the country? Primarily, it is revealed that, despite many criticisms, this project has brought positive impact in terms of physical and visible development at higher educational institutions in the country. But in terms of governance, it creates complexities in many cases. In addition, it also contributes generating negative impact on the factors of education, for example, interpersonal relationship among the faculty members. Moreover, there are many other issues which are derived as consequences of the project. This paper also puts forward some policy implications in this regard.

However, this study is followed by qualitative in nature of research method and based on case study. In addition, personal experiences and observations have also been taken into account to prepare it. Therefore, both primary and secondary data have been used to make this paper presentable.

Keywords: Governance, Quality Education, HEQEP, Bangladesh

Introduction

Bangladesh[1] is moving fast in term of economic growth, social development, poverty alleviation, school enrollment of children and so

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on. Despite such creditable achievements, the country faces a wide criticism about quality of education, among many others, from primary level to higher level education. Since independence to 2017, the numbers of educational institutions from primary level to higher level have increased remarkably as the numbers of students have increased in the country.

However, after independent in 1971, till 1985, Bangladesh had six higher educational institutions or universities, including University of Dhaka, University of Rajshahi, Bangladesh Agriculture University and Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (UGC, 2015). In other words, the country inherited these universities. However, within 15 years later the government of Bangladesh set up five more universities. In 1998, the government upgraded the Institute of Post Graduate Medicine and Research (IPGMR) which is well known as PG Hospital, to a medical university. In 2001, the then government decided to establish 12 universities of science and technology in 12 districts. In the meantime, in 2003, the government elevated the existing four institutes of technology known as BIT, to full-fledged engineering and technology universities. Currently, there are 39 public universities in Bangladesh (UGC, 2017). To match the expanding demand of higher education, the then government of Bangladesh passed an Act in 1992, allowing entrepreneurs to set up private universities in the country. But there is a lot of criticism about private universities due to lack of quality guarantee. In 2005, the government of Bangladesh formed a powerful committee to investigate the academic activities of private universities and finally decided to shut down five private universities due to low quality and other irregularities. Presently, there are 98 private universities in the country (UGC, 2017).

Indeed, tertiary education is central to the creation of the intellectual capacity on which knowledge production and utilization depend. To cope with and face global competition new types of tertiary institutions are needed and the traditional universities need to change their modes of operation and delivery. It also needs to take opportunities offered by the information and communication technology (ICT). Therefore, there is no alternative but quality education and adoption of ICT in education. But

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[1]Bangladesh, located in South Asia, has a long recorded history. In the recent past, it came under British rule which lasted for nearly two hundred years from 1757 to 1947. During that period Bangladesh was a part of the British Indian provinces of Bengal and Assam. At the end of British rule in August 1947, the sub-continent was divided into India and Pakistan. Bangladesh again became a part of Pakistan and came to be known as East Pakistan. It remained so till 1971. It emerged on the world map as an independent and sovereign country on December 16, 1971 after a nine-month long war of liberation against Pakistan.

the major difficulty faced by higher level education sector is generated from inadequate response to longstanding problems encountering its tertiary education institutions. Among these unresolved problems are inequalities of access and outcomes, need to expand tertiary sector coverage in a sustainable way, lack of quality and relevance, and more importantly rigid governance structure and management practices. Now it is a matter of question that what factors are responsible for abating quality of education at higher level in the country. To overcome the abating situation, however, University Grants Commission (UGC) of Bangladesh, which is the apex body to monitor all activities at higher level, has been implementing a project titled `Higher Education Quality Enhancement Project (HEQEP)' as per strategic plan for higher education in the country. So, this paper tries to know to what extent HEQEP contributes to education development and education governance for ensuring quality education at higher level in Bangladesh.

HEQEP: A Brief Background

Considering the country's overall situation of higher education sector and with the request of the Ministry of Education, University Grants Commission (UGC) prepared a strategic plan for higher education for the period 2006-2026. The 20-year plan figured out that there would be massive increase in the number of higher education aspirants and to meet the demand it would be required 28 more new universities by 2026. And, for this, an investment portfolio of Tk 269.18 billion would be required (UGC, 2006). As a follow up of the plan, Ministry of Education solicited the World Bank's support in this regard. After a series of consultations with different stakeholders, including World Bank, Economic Relations Division (ERD), Planning Commission, the Ministry of Education and UGC developed the project titled `Higher Education Quality Enhancement Project (HEQEP) and it was approved by the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (ECNEC) on October 23, 2008. Subsequently, the Financing Agreement between the Government of Bangladesh and the World Bank was signed on April 05, 2009. The estimated cost of the project is Tk 6810.4 million (IDA Tk 5984.8 million and GoB Tk 825.6 million). The duration of the project was from 2008-2009 to 2013-2014 (UGC, 2009). The project was restructured in January 2013 to facilitate full achievement of project objectives and to ensure the sustainability of reforms introduced under the project and the project implementation period was extended up to October 31, 2015. Later the project implementation period was again extended and it will be up to December 2018. The revised total estimated cost of this project is Tk. 19024.19 million (UGC, 2013:3).

The main objective of the project is to improve the quality and relevance of the teaching and research environment in higher education institutions

through encouraging both innovation and accountability within universities and by enhancing the technical and institutional capacity of the higher education sector. To accomplish the objective, the project has been divided into four components- (i) promoting academic innovation fund (AIF) (ii) building institutional capacity (iii) raising the connectivity capacity of the higher education sector and (iv) project management. However, the AIF allocates grants through three competitive windows: (i) improvement of teaching-learning at the undergraduate and master's programs (ii) enhancement of capabilities for non-degree and post graduate research programs; and (iii) university-wide innovations (UGC, 2009). These are known as (i) Window-1: Teaching-Learning (ii) Window-2: Research and (3) Window-3: University-wide (UW) (HEQEPOM, 2013:14).However, under this project, hundreds of sub-projects through different windows has been implemented and under implementation both at public and private universities all over the country.

Objectives of the Paper

The main objective of this paper is to explore the contribution of HEQEP in ensuring quality education at higher level in Bangladesh. Specifically, it tries to assess the impact on interrelationship among the factors of education at tertiary level in the country.

Methodology

This study examines the contribution of HEQEP in ensuring quality education at higher level in Bangladesh. It also tries to know the impacts of the project on factors of education which are considered as very important for quality education at this level in the country. However, as part of the project, as many as 20 sub-projects have been implemented and/or under implementation at the University of Rajshahi. Among these sub-projects, three have been selected purposively as case for this study. So, it is followed by a qualitative in nature and a case study oriented research method. For this, both primary and secondary data have been used in this paper. For primary data, observation and personal experiences have been accounted while the government documents such as UGC reports, HEQEP operational manuals, international donor documents, newspaper reports, journal articles, internet materials and so on are reviewed for secondary data. However, to achieve the objectives, only University of Rajshahi, the second largest university in the country, has been selected purposively as study area for this study. It is believed that it would represent the whole scenario of Bangladesh. It may be mentioned here that in this study university level education has been considered as higher level education in Bangladesh.

Higher Level Education Structure and Monitoring Authority in Bangladesh

It is said that education is the backbone of a nation. To overcome all the constraints and take standard position in the world, it is urgently needed education and it should be quality as well as need based education for sustainable development of Bangladesh. Therefore, the successive governments have given the education sector priority in the policy agenda and taken various initiatives in this regard. Article 17 of the Constitution of Bangladesh also guarantees primary education for all children at free of cost. However, there are three main educational systems in Bangladesh. These are: (a) General Education System, (b) Madrasah Education System and (c) Technical - Vocational Education System. Each of these three main systems is divided into five levels: (i) Primary Level (ii) Junior Level (iii) Secondary Level (iv) Higher Secondary Level and (v) Tertiary Level.

However, at higher level, there are also five types of higher education system in Bangladesh as follows: (i) General Education, (ii) Science, Technology and Engineering Education, (iii) Medical Education (iv) agricultural Education and (v) Distance Education. Apart from these five types, Madrasah and Vocational education is also offered at the higher level of education in the country.

Presently, higher level education consists of 3-year pass-course and 4-year honours course for bachelor's degree, 2-year Master's course for pass course graduates and1-year Master's course for honours graduates in Bangladesh. It may be mentioned here that the Report of the Commission on National Education, 1959 known as Sharif Commission, recommended 3-year instead of 2-year for bachelor degree and 2-year instead of 1-year for Master degree. After releasing this report, students went on protest against these recommendations, increasing the duration of academic year and demanded to cancel such types of recommendations[2].

However, in term of monitoring authority, there are two ministries-- Ministry of Primary and Mass Education and Ministry of Education in Bangladesh. Ministry of Primary and Mass Education is responsible for monitoring all the activities up to primary level education in the country whereas Ministry of Education is responsible to look after all the activities from junior level to tertiary level education in the country. For this, there are some bodies to assist the ministry.

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[2] See more Ali, Mohammad Elias (1999) The Education Commissions and the Committees through the Ages and Educational Reforms and Development: Bangladesh Perspective, Jagoroni Prokashony, Dhaka, Bangladesh, pp.292-324.

Discussion: HEQEP in Higher Education in Bangladesh

HEQEP: Central structure and dealing

The HEQEP central office is located at Dhaka Trade Centre in Dhaka. The central HEQEP is leading by a bureaucrat. He performs as Project Director who is also an additional Secretary of the cadre service. Besides, 37 more officers and employees are working under this project. So far it is known that most of the officers are deputed here from administration cadre service and few from education cadre (teachers of different government colleges). They are delegated offices such as program office, procurement office, monitoring office, and so on. It is also said that they are trained from foreign and many of them left this office for getting promotion in their line ministry. In some cases, there were some problems in dealing with the sub-project activities in term of getting proper guidelines or advice to implement activities at local level, entity level.

However, HEQEP secretariat calls for proposals, issuing letters to all public and private universities in the country. The eligible entities are (i) Departments (ii) Faculties (iii) Institutes (iv) Centers (v) Universities (vi) combination of two or more of the above entities. After proposal call, a five-week time period are allowed to conceive project ideas and transform them into proposals in a format and after submission the complete proposals, the total time for selection the proposals is 20 weeks[3] (UGC, 2013).

HEQEP: Local structure and dealing

As per Operations Manual, there is a sub-project management team which is consisting of a sup-project manager (SPM), a deputy sub-project manager and a number of members but not more than six in total of the sub-project management team (SPMT). All the members of sub-project management team are supposed to be faculty members. But it may vary in accordance with the nature of proposal submitting entity. The SPMT is approved by the academic committee of the respective department. But the members of the SPMT are allied themselves prior and show their interest at the meeting of academic committee and the committee just approves this team. The team then takes whole responsibility from preparing the complete proposal (CP) to submit it to the proper authority. If the CP is awarded/ granted, members of the SPMT cannot be replaced without logical reasons prescribed in the operations manual. However, if granted, the SPM has been given authority to hire support staff provisionally as will be required for the implementation of the sub-

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[3] For details, we can see the HEQEP operations manual, 2013 which is available at www.heqep-ugc.gov.bd

project, e.g., office secretary/manager, procurement officer, accountant, finance officer, data entry operator, messenger, janitor etc. Such provisionally hired staff shall stand terminated on the date of the sub-project implementation is completed (HEQEPOM, 2013:39).

However, the office of the Director, Planning and Development of the public universities is the focal point for this academic innovation fund (AIF) and will function as its secretariat for all sub-projects related activities. The Director, Planning and Development of the university will be head of university academic innovation fund secretariat (UAIFS). One deputy director from finance division will act as the deputy head (HEQEPOM, 2013:39).

Impacts of HEQEP on Factors of Education

Teaching-learning has four aspects: teacher, student, learning process and learning situation. The teacher creates the learning situation for the student. The process is the interaction between the student and the teacher (Aggarwal, 1995). So, a sound teaching-learning environment is very important for quality education. HEQEP intervenes to improve the learning environment at higher level education in the country. Under the project, as many as 124 sub-projects for the round three were granted in different windows in different categories both from public and private universities all over the country (UGC, 2014). It is believed that the learning environment at the granted entity will be enhanced through implementation of these sub-projects at their respective universities. At this round, a total of 11 sub-projects in different windows in different categories were granted from the University of Rajshahi. Among these sub-projects, some were for 2-year period and some were for 3-year period for implement from July 1, 2014 to June 30, 2016 and July 1, 2014 to June 30, 2017 respectively.

Infrastructural Development

It is observed that a visible infrastructural development has happened at the implementing entities, creating a sound teaching-learning environment. Setting up computer labs, installation of overhead projectors for charming presentation and delivery of lectures, renovation and modernization of classrooms and its furniture, teachers' room, seminar library and so on are visible features and achievements of such sub-projects. Besides, in accordance with the approved CPs of the respective entities, organizing research workshops, national seminars, international conferences and many soon are considered as magnificent achievements. But these are seemed as invisible as well as short-lived achievements. However, it can be said that without such type of financial supports, it could not be possible to undertake these activities. These activities have brought manifold impacts on teaching-learning

environment at the public universities. Further, it can again be said that, especially in the cases of public universities, these types of achievements and activities could not be accomplished due to shortage of funds of the internal sources or own financial support. Basically, there was a wider scope for the sub-projects granted under window-1 for infrastructural development.

Skill development

HEQEP calls proposals in different categories in three windows. These includes: Window-1: Teaching-Learning, Window-2: Research and Window-3: University wide (UW). The window-2 gives emphasis on research which includes: modernization and /or strengthening of research capabilities in departments, improvement of existing post-graduate programs, development of high quality MS/M Phil/PhD programs, initiation of joint academic and research programs, development and/or improvement of the laboratories and workshops to conduct innovative researches, collaborative projects, professional development of academic and support staff for research activities and so on. In line with these objectives, a number of research workshops, including pedagogical development, curriculum development, qualitative and quantitative research have been organized. It is believed that these will be helpful for skill development of academic staff. Besides, setting up research center and computer lab will also be helpful for academic as well as students for improvement of their teaching-learning capacity.

General Impression about HEQEP

So far I have observed and experienced, overall impression of most of the teachers at the University of Rajshahi about this sub-project is not good. They treat, favorably if I say they `tease' the activities run under sub-projects as `Oh! HEQEP? Even, in many cases, these people, faculty members, do not utter `HEQEP' in correct spelling. They always criticize these sub-projects as `Tiles' project, `window' project, `ceiling' project, `AC' project, `tour' project and many so on. Consequently, internal harmony among faculty members has become dwindled. Why is it happened? Who is responsible for this situation? How it could be overcome? It is tried to explore the answers of these questions.

Primarily, it is revealed that the process itself from initiation to implementation of such sub-projects is responsible, in some cases. Because, when the process, preparing complete proposal (CP), is initiated at the implementing entity, it then appears the attitudes how it would be implemented, if granted, as there would be a sub-project management team (SPMT).In many cases, it depends on the attitudes of the sub-project managers (SPMs). Again in many cases, the implementing entity is not

considered as `owners of the sub-projects rather it goes to the responsibility of the SPMT. It is surely considered due to its `operations manual' as stated `*the SPM shall be responsible for the implementation of the sub-project and be accountable to the AIF grant recipient entity and would report to it periodically. S/he shall liaise with all concerned agencies in respect of sub-project implementation (*HEQEP Operations Manual, 2013:39).'

However, in many cases, most of the faculty members do not know about the category of `window' and its functioning capacity. It may be one of the reasons for showing their attitudes in such a way.

Time out

As we have already known that the project implementation period is up to December 2018, there is very little scope to share the whole objectives widely of this project with different stakeholders, especially all faculty members of every university. Because, it is observed that many faculty members believe that the sub-project is given as gift' to somebody. This perception is not really true. The fact is that there is a competition. So far it is known that out of nearly 600 proposals (CP-complete proposal) only 124 CPs were selected after a rigorous evaluation for the round three. So, it is not gifted rather merit of the CP is the main criteria for award.

Procurement issue

Procurement is one of the major important activities of any development project and most difficult as well. The government of Bangladesh has made it mandatory for all institutions/organizations/agencies to follow The Public Procurement Act 2006 and The Public Procurement Rules 2008 (PPR) for the purchase of all kinds of goods, works and services from within the country and abroad to be made under both the non-development (revenue) as well as development budgets.

This is very difficult job. It is not easy to do smoothly these activities by taking training for 2 or 3 days. For the academics, it is very difficult and troublesome jobs. This hampers their academic and research activities. Besides, these types of training might bring a very little impact on their academic and research activities. Rather, it creates, in many cases, dissatisfaction and confusion among other faculty members over value of goods, works or services.

Dissatisfaction

In many cases, it is observed that after getting selection of sub-projects, dissatisfaction appears among faculty members over the implementation process. It is true that if implementation process is not transparent, it creates confusion among other members who are not members of SPMT.

But generally it is seemed that the sub-project is the `project of the SPMT only' as all the responsibilities related to the project go to the SPMT. The entity will not bear any responsibility if there is any `anomaly' during the implementation of the project activities. So, the project is pushed to the `net' of the SPMT.

Politics

We all know that there is politics in public universities in Bangladesh. Teachers are divided into different `colour' like `Blue', `Yellow', `White', `Pink', etc. and allied with mainstream national political parties such as Bangladesh Awami League, Bangladesh Nationalist Party, Bangladesh Jamaat-e- Islami, Jatiya Party and so on. No teacher can be found `colourless.' There may be `active' or `inactive'. This is the difference. Consequently, differences in opinion in academic activities are appeared visible. So, there is politics. The sub-project activities will be seen beyond `politics', can anybody imagine it? No. As a result, there may be `cooperation' or `non-cooperation' in implementing project activities.

Recruitment issue

It is observed that, in many cases, dissatisfaction often creates among faculty members, who are not involved with the sub-projects, over recruitment of staff. According to HEQEP Operations Manual, the SPM has been given authority to recruit staff provisionally for running the activities smoothly and such provisionally hired staff shall stand terminated on the date of the sub-project implementation is completed.

Recommendations

- Procurement should be done by the university's respective body/department. As the rules of PPR are not effective with the job nature of teachers. It does not go with their responsibility as an academic. They are engaged in teaching-learning and research activities. In future, it should be considered.
- Central to local dealing officials of HEQEP should be amicable with the faculty members engaged in running the project activities as they are dignified in term of the job nature.
- Transparency is a must. Without transparency, it would create confusion among faculty members. So, all activities should be transparent although there is no `hide-and-seek' in running the project activities.
- The sub-project should be considered as it is the project of the entity. Here the SPMT should be honored, recognizing their effort rather criticizing.

- Generous cooperation irrespective of 'colour' should be extended in running project activities. It should be come from all faculty members.
- All faculty members of the implementing entity should be involved in project activities in different capacities in accordance with the nature of project.
- Faculty members other than SPMT should consider the staff recruitment for the sub-projects generously as it is very temporary.

Conclusion

There is debate over HEQEP as it is 'bless' or 'curse' for higher education in Bangladesh. It is a burning issue as higher education of a country is central to the creation of the intellectual capacity on which knowledge production and utilization depend. As a developing country, Bangladesh faces a huge resource constraint. But the available resources should be utilized in maximum way. Referring resource constraints, we should not be depended on others. We should not sell our identity; values, ethics, and traditions. These are our strength to move forward. Due to HEQEP funds many visible infrastructural development at project implementing entities have been possible in public universities. These projects help the entities to cope with modern ICT facilities. It also helps to improve the teaching-learning environment. On the other hand, it also brings, in many cases, dissatisfaction, conflict, disharmony and so on among faculty members. That is not good for our future at higher education in Bangladesh.

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