Chapter 28
Strategies to Mitigate the COVID-19 Challenges of Universities in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

The education sector in Bangladesh has been affected severely by the COVID-19 pandemic crisis like many other countries around the globe. Both the public and private universities faced different types of challenges to continue the teaching-learning process during this time. The chapter has explored these challenges and mitigation strategies based on quantitative and qualitative studies with undergraduate and graduate students of public and private universities. The study has covered both public and privately owned general and engineering universities to explore more specific issues and directives. Moreover, in-depth interviews were conducted with teachers to learn the problems they faced and subsequent strategies to cope with the challenges to minimize these challenges and educational loss. The study identified the infrastructural, technical, psychological, health, educational policy, and financial-related challenges faced by key stakeholders. The study incorporated directives to overcome these challenges and provide guidelines for policymakers at home and abroad.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-7436-2.ch028

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INTRODUCTION

The economy, business, and education have gone through significant changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic that was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) in January 2020 (Rana et al., 2020). To rescue the academic year, online education has been introduced globally. A sudden shift in the modality brought many challenges, especially in the education sector. The intensity of different challenges in education during pandemic varied across the least developed countries to developing and developed countries (Saeed, 2020). For developing countries, this transition itself was one of the major challenges as they had no proper facilities for conducting online classes due to poor infrastructural facilities along with financial hardship and educational policy-related shortcomings, which may initiate a signal about inequality in education among students especially at the tertiary level within Bangladesh and across (Saeed, 2020). In addition to financial adversities, students from universities have been suffered a lot in Bangladesh by losing their academic life and social life which severely affects their mental health (Dutta & Smita, 2020). Furthermore, the students' and teachers' communities have been facing different obstacles of lack of devices, poor internet coverage, high cost of the data package, and adaptation to the new learning environment (Dutta & Smita, 2020).

Public universities in Bangladesh are mostly financed by the government and private universities are mainly run by the tuition fees from the students. Edupreneurs of tertiary education, the private universities, have been observing operational and financial issues during this pandemic situation. Admission and enrolment of students had been dropped significantly. The unprecedented situation forced the private universities in Bangladesh to reduce the salary of the teachers and other employees to overcome their financial hurdles (Kamol, 2020). However, many students from middle-income families of private universities could not finish their studies due to the financial crisis during the pandemic time that created uncertainties in their social life and affected mental well-being. It is a point to be noted here that the majority of the private universities initiated some kinds of financial assistance for the students to boost up enrolment during this period (Kamol, 2020).

METHODOLOGY

To explore the overall scenario regarding challenges of public and private universities that have been passing during the pandemic situation of COVID-19, both quantitative and qualitative approaches have been used. The time frame of the study was in October, 2020, when the case per 1 million population was 2,467 and deaths per 1 million population was 36 in Bangladesh (worldometer.info, 2020). It is a point to be mentioned here that diagnosed patients in Bangladesh had been increasing until the end of August, 2020, and later on, it had a declining trend until the end of October, 2020. However, an increasing pattern of new cases had been observed since November, 2020 in Bangladesh which was quite alarming ("Bangladesh Reports 3674 Cases Highest Deaths in 101 Days," 2021).

The study emphasized digging out probable challenges faced by the private and public universities during the pandemic situation and suggested mitigation strategies in the light of qualitative interviews from students and teachers of universities. In the qualitative approach, 13 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with public university students and 6 FGDs with private university students were conducted. To make the qualitative outcome more rational, the study divided the students into technical and non-technical backgrounds; along with universities from general and engineering categories.

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