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Covid-19 Pandemic and Higher Education

Challenges and the Way Forward
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Table of Contents

Introduction 3
Objectives and Structure 6
Protection from the Pandemic 9
Digitalizing Higher Education 13
Post-disciplinary Research during Pandemic 17
Pandemic and Employment Opportunities 19
Conclusion 22
Annexure I: Report of the E-Assembly 23
Annexure II: E-Assembly on Covid-19 Pandemic and Higher Education: Challenges and Beyond, June 17-18, 2020, Resource Persons 53
I. Introduction

The state of higher education in South Asia, including Bangladesh, has been one of struggle, especially in the areas of academic research, teaching and developing efficient human resources, long before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. The outbreak of Covid-19 has exacerbated this situation not only in South Asian universities, but in universities across the world. Universities have largely failed to respond quickly to the virus outbreak, except by temporarily shutting down their academic and teaching activities. Even universities in developed countries, including that of the US or UK, proved less worthy in prescribing medicines, limiting the number of casualties and developing vaccines to fight the virus. Yet, it cannot be denied that the universities of this region are also thoroughly ill-equipped when it comes to producing knowledge and developing medicines, particularly relating to the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, the outbreak of the pandemic perhaps exposes the age-old structural, financial and institutional weaknesses among the universities in South Asia in contributing to the production of knowledge and their practical usage. It is unfortunate to note that none of the universities of South Asia are in the first twenty of the “Best Universities in Asia,” and this is more shocking when China has ten and even Singapore, which has a population of less than 6 million people and became independent in 1965, has one of their universities in the top 20! The pre-pandemic weaknesses of higher education in Bangladesh became a nightmare when the pandemic led to the lockdown of all educational institutions of the country. However, on this, Bangladesh is not alone. The disruption of academic and teaching activities, delays in academic sessions, dealing with students who are affected by economic shocks, health issues and future crisis of unemployment, and ensuring cheap and uninterrupted online education for students during the pandemic pose some challenges to the higher education sector in Bangladesh.

Globally, the closure of educational institutions for an indefinite period has affected more than 1.5 billion students, which is nearly 90% of total enrolled students. According to Figure 1, the number of affected students at the tertiary level in Bangladesh is more than Italy, Pakistan, France and the United Kingdom. This is also because Bangladesh, save Pakistan, has a higher population and more students are enrolled in educational institutions. The Government of Bangladesh declared a nation-wide “general leave” on 26 March 2020 to prevent community transmission of Covid-19.
Teaching and learning faced great obstacles as educational institutions remained closed. The unprecedented scale of infection and death resulting from this pandemic has had crucial impacts on the state of higher education in Bangladesh, particularly for those who have been living in extreme economic and social conditions. There is a risk that if the students are compelled to stay out of classroom-based education for an extended period of time, they may become alienated from education.

**Figure 1: Closing Date of Universities in Various Countries due to the COVID-19 Crisis**

In addition, the dropout rate in Bangladesh is likely to rise as a result of disruptions to education, income earning activities and educational support programmes, including getting scholarships and financial support. Moreover, female students may face an increasing rate of dropout in Bangladesh as many families may reduce financing women education and divert their resources to other sectors.

In the light of the pandemic’s impacts on education, which are not going to disappear overnight, we consider that it is time to search for suitable alternatives, policy plans and actions at our disposal to ensure that education
needs are fulfilled, while facing all the challenges in the higher education sector worldwide and particularly in Bangladesh. Learning and gaining knowledge should be continued at all costs for the betterment of our current and future generations.

In this context, the Centre for Genocide Studies (CGS), University of Dhaka, in partnership with the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) Bangladesh, organized an e-Assembly on Covid-19 Pandemic and Higher Education: Challenges and Beyond on June 17-18, 2020. Followed by the e-assembly two policy webinars were organized on 15 October 2020 on Covid-19 Pandemic and Digitalizing Higher Education and on 22 October 2020 on COVID-19 Pandemic and Employment Opportunity to discuss widely about these two issues and seek recommendations.

The Chief Guest of the e-Assembly, Professor Dr. Md. Akhtaruzzaman, Vice-Chancellor, University of Dhaka, mentioned in his deliberation that it is time to search for suitable alternatives. The era we are witnessing is commonly known as the ‘new normal’. Hence, to cope with this ‘new normal’ situation, new measures need to be adopted and suitable alternatives need to be sorted out.

As long as mankind prevails, education needs to continue, withstanding all the challenges. Learning and dissemination of knowledge should continue at all costs for the benefit of our current and future generations. However, it is a big challenge to reach every student and impart education across the globe. The Vice-Chancellor also said that an idle brain is the devil’s workshop. Therefore, academics need to make maximum use of the lockdown time. Technology has given us this wonderful opportunity to continue our education and overcome this disruption.

Therefore, technology can be used to overcome the delay and disruption in academic and teaching activities, and to ensure equitable access to all students to make the medium affordable. In this way, even during the pandemic, higher education can be inclusive by using innovations in technology. Wider access to education in this challenging time will help develop tolerance and confidence among the students, and will help them to

We were at the initial stage of the outbreak and the global slogan was 'stay home, save lives'; now it has changed to 'stay alert, control the virus'. This gives us a clear signal that we can no longer keep ourselves confined in houses and we need to get engaged in work. We have to coordinate between life and livelihood for the betterment of our future generations.

Professor Dr. Md. Akhtaruzzaman, 
Vice-Chancellor, University of Dhaka
reevaluate their future career plans and prepare to survive in the post-pandemic world. This policy paper is an attempt towards this end. The policy paper incorporates some recommendations and ways forward regarding how to overcome the challenges posed by Covid-19 in the higher education sector. These recommendations are based on the discussions of the designated speakers and participants at the e-Assembly.

II. Objectives and Structure

The policy paper identifies the challenges, future opportunities and action-oriented recommendations in four key areas:

1. Protection from the Pandemic;
2. Digitalizing Higher Education;
3. Post-disciplinary Research during the Pandemic; and
4. Pandemic and Employment Opportunities.

The Government of Bangladesh (GOB), under the prudent and dynamic leadership of the Honorable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, is firmly committed to implementing the SDGs by 2030. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Bangladesh is one of the more promising countries with regard to attaining the SDGs on action to end poverty, ensure access to education, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity by 2030.

In this, inclusive and quality education for all is considered as one of the most powerful and proven vehicles for sustainable development. It also aims to provide equal access to affordable vocational training, and to eliminate gender and wealth disparities with the aim of achieving universal access to quality higher education. Therefore, those in the educational sector, particularly in the universities, need to be very firmly committed to ensuring the achievement of SDGs, particularly Goal 4 that calls for “ensuring equitable and quality education and promoting life-long learning opportunities for all.”

Universities around the world have a role to play in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Secretary General of the United Nations (UNSG) duly recognized the role of universities to ensure the achievement of SDG Goal 4. The UN Secretary General has expressed his interest in having a meeting with the Vice-Chancellors of the world at the United Nations; the event will

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be organized by Columbia University, possibly in 2021. The main objective of the conference would be to convey the message that universities have obligations to help their respective governments and nations in achieving SDGs. Therefore, the universities need to be very precise and focus their academic and teaching activities towards achieving equitable and quality education for all. Even during the pandemic, universities around the world are re-strategizing their activities and priorities to continue their academic and teaching activities. In this context, the policy paper intends to provide specific recommendations and stimulate discussions and research in near future for meeting challenges in the higher education sector in Bangladesh.

The e-Assembly mainly involved the participation of academics, educationists, university administrators, members of the university regulatory authority viz., University Grants Commission (UGC), researchers (from IT sectors and others), government officials, civil society and students. Based on the wider discussions, we identified four major stakeholders in the higher education sector. There must be coordination and collaboration among these four key stakeholders during this pandemic in Bangladesh and also at the global level. We consider that the students are the most important stakeholders of higher education, whose predicaments need to be addressed during the pandemic. The students are the end-users and beneficiaries of any policy action to ensure education. The Covid-19 pandemic has caused serious disruptions in the regular academic life of around 40 million students in Bangladesh. In the higher education sector, both public and private universities are currently operating in Bangladesh.

Apart from this, Madrassa education is also a large subsection in the higher education sector, providing Fazil and Kamil degrees through 1089 ² (Fazil) and 254 ³ (Kamil) institutions that are equivalent to graduation and post-graduation in the general stream⁴. In this policy paper, the major focus is on general education i.e. public and private universities in the higher education of Bangladesh. Private universities in Bangladesh commenced in 1992 to impart education under the Private University Act 1992. According to a UGC report (2018), there are 154 universities in Bangladesh. Among them, 49 are government universities, 103

³ Ibid.
private universities, and 2 international universities.

In these public and private academic institutions, approximately 3.9 million students are currently facing obstacles in receiving their education due to the pandemic. The policy paper focuses on the question of how teaching and learning can be accessible for the students of higher education during the pandemic. How can education reach every student across the globe with adequate safety measures and equitable justice?

The teaching and research personnel need to perform the vital task of continuing teaching and learning during this lockdown situation. They are directly responsible for the new and quality pedagogy and can act as a catalyst for implementing new policies adopted by the university administration and state authority. Therefore, the key questions are regarding how teaching and research personnel can cope with the new situation, and how new technology can be adopted by them to continue with the new education system.

The university administration, headed by the Vice-Chancellor, takes decisions and arranges necessary funds and logistics to implement new policies. The state authority also plays a statutory and regulatory role to keep the higher education sector vibrant and functional even during this pandemic. Moreover, there is great concern about how to ensure the health, financial and social well-being of the students during the pandemic, especially those belonging to the low-income sections of society. The multi-layered income groups in Bangladesh require robust academic support systems to ensure education for all, which is easily accessible and usable despite locational, economic and technological barriers.

The policy paper is divided into four sections, and each section focuses on challenges and concerns, as well as recommendations to overcome them. The paper also highlights the implementation of strategies in the short-, medium- and long-term, with the objective of overcoming the current challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Section I: Protection from the Pandemic

Worldwide, armed conflict, forced displacement, climate change, man-made disasters and protracted crises disrupt

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education, and at present, the situation is worse due to the outbreak of the pandemic. During this critical time, students, teachers, academics and administrative staff are all not only facing crises in securing their access to health, income, water, housing, etc. but also struggling to keep the education system functional. The closing down of employment opportunities, particularly for women, causes intra-home inequality. The male income-earning partners are reluctant to extend their support to their partner in household activities. Women thus face a double burden of work in their families, while they are more exposed to domestic violence and abuse during the lockdown. There is also a serious protection issue with regard to financial solvency during the pandemic. The intra-home inequality not only creates additional mental stress for the students but also increases their sense of vulnerability. These effects of the pandemic pose serious threats to the task of protecting students. Some of the key concerns regarding protection from the pandemic that were discussed during the e-Assembly are presented below:

• Family members can ensure livelihoods for these families. In Bangladesh, the existing socio-economic conditions make online based education system challenging. Many students are hard to reach during the pandemic as well.

• The Covid-19 pandemic not only impacts the household expenses of the poor, vulnerable and disadvantaged socio-economic groups across the world, but it has changed socio-economic, demographic, psychological and mental health, restricting the poorest household’s education as they now need to invest more on healthcare and maintaining their livelihoods.

• The return of migrant workers due to the pandemic creates serious threats to the economic and livelihood systems in developing countries. For example, Nepal has initiated online classes for students but the existing financial challenges make the whole thing less relevant for these students. Nepal, for many years, depended on remittance but due to Covid-19, many Nepalese workers have come back from overseas. Neither government support nor

• The concern is that over the last decade, universities were considered to be successful but in reality, a number of questions can be raised viz., what kind of knowledge is being produced, and how rankings are being influenced by this knowledge production. There have been discussions ranging from complete
substitution to seriously considering what kind of research needs to be done, and how to take this forward. In many universities, such realization engenders the idea that they need to improve but may not according to the rankings. Moreover, the high-ranking universities charge high fees, which is difficult for the students to manage in this situation.

Universities around the world have taken initiatives to deal with protection from the pandemic. In this context, the policy paper presents two case studies regarding how universities are currently dealing with protection from the pandemic in Bangladesh and the United Kingdom.

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**Case Study I: Dealing with Protection from Pandemic: Bangladesh Context**

The public and private universities of Bangladesh, since the beginning of lockdown in March 2020, have been planning to commence academic activities. As a part of this plan, almost 20 public universities are pursuing online classes/education, although partially, in this pandemic situation. The University of Dhaka has taken several measures regarding protection from the pandemic, except online education. To ensure health protection during this situation, the University of Dhaka formed the Corona Response Committee in March, prepared and distributed hand sanitizers, strengthened tele-medicine activities of the university medical centre and launched a counseling lab. The University also identified financially challenged students according to their departments and provided economic support to them in the form of stipends. The university has also established a Covid-19 testing lab to contribute to the health sector. The Dhaka University authorities also initiated research on Covid-19. Dhaka University researchers successfully decoded genome sequences of five Covid-19 samples in May 2020 under the project initiated by the Corona Response Technical Committee of the university.

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**Case Study II: The UK Experience**

UK universities were closed down in February 2020. Students’ dormitories were closed and students had to shift to private accommodation. At the beginning, the UK faced the challenge of testing a large number of people amidst a very high death toll. Lack of social interaction and mental health
issues resulted in front-line disruption. Universities in the UK have now adopted online learning rather than regular face to face learning.

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Key Recommendations

The key actors to ensure the protection of students from academic disruption are the university administration and faculties along with state authorities (education ministry, university grants commission etc.). The policy recommendations regarding the protection of higher education students from the pandemic have three timelines. These are:

Short-Term Measures

- In order to prevent academic disruptions, the *short-term* measures should include immediate identification of the vulnerabilities of students through socio-demographic studies conducted by the universities. The mapping of the most vulnerable students should help develop new methodologies in the teaching and learning process. Online teaching can be considered as a short-term solution; however, it requires overcoming the digital divide challenge.

- The pandemic situation not only poses threats to the students’ physical health but also causes mental health hazards. To deal with this situation, the key actors are again the faculties and university administration. The *short-term* measures include situational analysis of the threat of reopening universities while the possibility of infection still exists. The universities can provide health support facilities for students infected with Covid-19 as well. Universities should maintain liaisons with the public health department to ensure proper treatment.

- In order to protect from the economic threat, the short-term measures should consider that the lockdown exacerbates the loss of job opportunities for students. Many university students were employed in part-time jobs that have been temporarily shut down due to the pandemic. The guardians and income earning members of the family are facing similar problems. In this time, it is therefore difficult for the students to pay regular fees to university administrations, as well as to bear daily livelihood
expenses. Moreover, funding opportunities are shrinking at an alarming rate at universities all over the world. Therefore, the short-term measures should include immediate rethinking of university fee structures, but that has to be rationalized so that such reductions of fees do not jeopardize the economic well-being of faculties.

Medium-Term Measures

- The medium-term measures require rethinking fee structures for economically disadvantaged students. Suspension of tuition fees, provisions for temporary job offers to needy students and arrangement of education loans can be undertaken as medium-term measures.

- Provide economic support to students infected with Covid-19.

- The issue of mental health protection should also be considered as a mid-term measure. University based counselling is highly recommended to help students deal with mental stress, anxiety and the fear of future uncertainty in this situation. Mental health protection can also include short term education loans for students, as well as part-time job opportunities.

Long-Term Measures

- The long-term measures should include more research on public health management systems, particularly in the developing countries. More funding on research and development of vaccines and related medicine should also be taken up as long-term measures by the universities.

- It should include more research on identifying related challenges to the disruption of education e.g., intra-house inequality, growing gender inequality, growing social inequality, disruption of development activities etc. All the stakeholders should immediately think about new teaching and research methodologies. Instead of thinking about securing the highest position in the ranking order, universities should carry out more research during this pandemic. The role of students and faculties need to be redefined. They must engage in research activities which have social value to deal with the pandemic. Since universities are now offering online teaching to the students, they should remember that students with economic hardships and digitally illiterate guardians may also cause disruptions in this process.
Finally, the long-term measures need to enhance the coverage of social safety nets to address new kinds of vulnerable groups in society who have recently faced grave economic and financial shocks due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Section II: Digitalizing Higher Education

The participants at the e-assembly agreed that education can establish an ideal and functioning democracy where justice, liberty, equality, and prosperity will be ensured. Education enables people to increase their capacity and strengthen humanistic traits through knowledge. However, the current situation has led to the disruption of normal academic activities in all countries. To cope with this, many universities have adopted online education systems to continue academic and teaching activities. Due to existing financial and economic conditions in all countries, access to digital education is difficult to ensure and needs to be addressed and resolved by country-specific plans and solutions. The continuation of digital education without addressing these existing issues may create discrimination between students having difference socio-economic backgrounds and status.

Minimizing the cost of internet usage will ensure increased access and contribute to globalizing higher education. For the modernization of the global education system and the expansion of quality education, least developed universities have to demand access to lectures, tutorials, reading materials and literature from highly equipped universities around the world. However, to avoid the creation of dependency on the highly equipped universities, there should instead be a two-way interaction and sharing of knowledge and expertise, as well as co-teaching and coordinated education programmes.

The pandemic has created the scope of obtaining globalized education by using internet connectivity. However, there are certain concerns regarding digitalizing higher education during the pandemic. These are as follows:

- Only 5.6% of Bangladeshi households have computers. Ownership of television and personal computer devices is not very common. Penetration is also very low in the poorest areas. Broadband internet speed tends to be very low at 24.31 Mbps in general and 9.96 Mbps speed on mobile devices.
- Affordability of Internet is also an area to focus on. Internet connections in Bangladesh are usually cheap and
affordable. However, due to the pandemic and a potential crisis of job loss, maintenance of the cost has become a non-trivial concern, especially in the low-income households.

- Before digitalizing education, we have to ensure that such education is meaningful for the marginalized as well.

- The pedagogy and teaching method of digital education need to be carefully reviewed as at present; the education curriculum has turned into a job-seeking instrument.

- A great number of students of state-run universities of Bangladesh belong to the rural, underdeveloped and underprivileged areas of the countryside; such remote locations do not really offer the decent internet connection that is required to attend classes through online platforms.

- Digital education needs to develop technological infrastructure to make sure that everybody has access. It is difficult, particularly for developing countries, to provide adequate resources to build infrastructure and ensure access for all.

- The pandemic situation forced teachers and students to opt for online academic activities. However, faculties and students are less prepared for technological disturbances. The speed and quality of the internet for video lectures, home conditions of the students and faculties, availability of electricity supplies for digital equipment, for both the faculties and students, pose critical hurdles in this situation.

- There is great concern that classroom education may not be possible in the near future. It might take one year or more. Even if there is any successful vaccine in the next six months, it would require another six months to supply the vaccine across the globe.

**Key Recommendations**

The key actors in developing digital education systems are the university administration and faculties, along with the state authorities (education ministry, university grants commission etc.). Tech companies like Google and Microsoft, internet service providers, mobile network operators, ICT ministries are also considered as key actors in this process.
Short-Term Measures

Digital education is not an alternative to the current education system. It will play a more complementary role at present during the pandemic. The digital education system must ensure inclusiveness in terms of participation by the students, academics and research staff. The digital divide exists not only among the students but also among the faculty members. The digital education system needs to address this issue. Also, the needs of the faculty members should be assessed. The question of mindset also needs to be addressed as part of the short term measures towards digitizing the higher education system. Available technical services/software like Microsoft Team, Zoom, Hangouts, Google Meet, DingTalk, Lark have to be explored. Digital learning management systems like Moodle, Muktopath, Century Tech, Class Dojo, Edmodo have to be properly utilized. Other digital opportunities for students like EdX, Coursera, Canvas Network, Udemy, Ted-Ed Earth School and for teachers Thinglink, Buncee, Edpuzzle, Squig, Trello and phone tools like Cell Ed, Ustad Mobile, KaiOS, Funzi, Eneza education shall be taken into account as well.

In this regard, Professor Dr. Md. Sazzad Hossain, honorable member, University Grants Commission (UGC) Bangladesh informed the e-Assembly that the University Grants Commission (UGC) Bangladesh has already organized some surveys in Bangladesh regarding the prospects of launching an online education system as an immediate measure. The UGC is also planning to develop a policy to conduct online examinations and assessments. The Zhejiang University, China, has taken several initiatives for reducing the digital divide, including arranging a course hub, which attracted some 4,000 people from all around the world. The Zhejiang University teamed up with e-commerce company Alibaba to create an app called ‘DING TALK ZJU’, which attracted around 100,000 people from China and various other countries of the world to join the courses. Based on the experience of Zhejiang University, Professor Dr. Md. Sazzad Hossain proposed the following short-term measures:

- Bring all students under the digital education system. Foreign students should also be included in this structure.
- Open courses for all students worldwide.
- Arrange training for the faculty members to deal with their problems of using digital technology.
- Arrange internet services for teachers and students at low cost on a contract basis with various internet service providers and mobile operators.
- Arrange courses through video lecture packages for students, which will help
them to follow the lectures even if they fail to understand and attend a lecture.

- Provide financial support to underprivileged students.

**Medium-Term Measures**

- Digital education can be considered as an instrument for breaking the barriers of access to higher education. It requires collaboration and cooperation among different stakeholders including mobile network and internet service providers, information and communication firms, and computer and IT companies. But the most important collaboration can be among the universities.

- Expensive books, journals and references can be made available on digital platforms, thereby ensuring access for students from all over the world. It was pointed out that currently, the scientific and medical journals are very expensive, even on online platforms. To overcome this, it was proposed that knowledge and education should be globalized and made accessible to all free of charge.

- Require cooperation among government agencies, ministries, university administrations and internet service companies to develop IT infrastructure that is fast, easily accessible and less costly for the students.

- The accumulation of funds has to be considered in developing countries for this kind of infrastructure, which requires cooperation from external and internal stakeholders.

- University administrations can also think about adopting technology-based smart classrooms by integrating computers and specialized software for teaching and assessments, online platform for students’ participation and discussions (chat rooms), networking, and audio-video capacities. Smart classrooms can be integrated with the digital education system. These smart classrooms will create an environment of classroom teaching through video conferences.

**Long-Term Measures**

- Since there is a prediction that the pandemic will not end soon, universities must think of the adoption of new teaching and pedagogy for digital education. Universities from developing countries, including Bangladesh, should develop collaborations with developed country universities. They can develop joint courses and share lectures, reading,
teaching methods etc. Worldwide demand creation is important for such collaborations.

- It is a great time to address re-learning. Another creative area is to comprehend blended learning properly. Nonetheless, we must not lose what was gained from the virtual pedagogy when we may go back to the physical platform. Therefore, in order to build better future, the stakeholders need to take advantage of both and start implementing the procedures. Once a decision takes place, the rest will follow.

- Universities should open up their educational and teaching resources for others. Sharing of such resources will improve the quality of knowledge acquisition.

- Digital platforms will help to share e-learning materials, which will reduce the existing knowledge gap between the global North and South.

- Universities should consider building an online library. This kind of online library can be a repository of references, books, journals and course reading materials. Online libraries should be accessible to students as well as professionals who want to be part of the e-learning system. The knowledge can help not only the students but also professionals in the research and development sector.

Section III: Post-disciplinary Research during Pandemic

The future of research is a matter of concern at present. The pandemic has put a critical strain on university funds, which may affect the future of research. One of the panel speakers at the e-assembly said that as an impact of the pandemic, 50% of all Malaysian universities are likely to go bankrupt. Moreover, international students in Australia, the United States, Canada and other countries may not return to their universities in the near future. The lack of funding in science-based research may lead to misdirection as well. Another concern is that research during the pandemic has almost dried up in humanities disciplines. The pandemic has also forced a shift in the research methodologies of the social sciences and humanities. Fieldwork has been disrupted due to the lockdown situation. In some cases, conducting ethnographies and archival research have become almost impossible.

Key Recommendations

The key actors in dealing with the challenges of research in the aftermath of the pandemic
are public and private universities, university administration and faculties, along with the state authorities (education board, grants commission etc.). The Research and Development sector of multi-national companies (MNCs) should also play critical roles in generating post-pandemic research opportunities for the universities.

**Short-Term Measures**

- Universities and research labs should consider immediately that this is the new normal before the vaccines and drugs are developed. Therefore, they must seek opportunities for certain enterprises, such as online businesses, meetings, teaching and training etc.

- Research can focus on developing tools for new forms of employment, for example, live broadcast selling, policy value adding and social marketing.

- Attempts should be taken to convince policy-makers to increase research funding.

- In order to deal with the shortage of funds in the universities and labs, everyone in academia should show solidarity; everyone should take a pay cut, given the income rule drop, for at least one year. Also, universities need to innovate and adopt new research areas and generate funds. They also need to negotiate with the government to reduce concerns regarding future funding.

- Substantial investment in cyber technology, computer connectivity and so on should be ensured.

- Data exchange protocols with foreign universities should be reconsidered.

**Medium-Term Measures**

- Hybrid learning could be a solution for post-disciplinary research during the pandemic. In this regard, there can be a combination of traditional classroom and digital equipment to ensure uninterrupted teaching and academic activities.

**Long-Term Measures**

- The future broad research area should be how to deal with social governance issues like balancing pandemic prevention/control and peoples’ return to normal lives after this pandemic phase. Research areas also need to cover the impact of the pandemic on GDP, livelihood and employment opportunities, new import and export of goods and services, outdoor
activities, willingness of consumption and investment, purchase of masks, disinfectants, drugs etc.

- The research community needs to move forward together in terms of laying the groundwork for future multi-disciplinary approaches and broader access to funding. Research needs to be launched on humanitarian grounds and not merely on career grounds, especially in an unprecedented time such as the one we are going through at present.

- Post-pandemic research will have to be entirely different, in which its fruits will be evenly distributed to everyone. The structure and faces that already exist, as well as the research in various disciplines, all have to be rethought and re-imagined. A future has to be created where equality, if not equity, can be guaranteed; where everyone can participate, the research equipment are distributed fairly well and funding would be forthcoming.

Section IV: Pandemic and Employment Opportunities

Globally, more than 195 million people have lost their jobs due to the pandemic. In the US, there is already a loss of jobs of more than 20 million, and in Japan, new job openings have been the lowest in recent times. Even countries like China are suffering from increasing unemployment. In India, the unemployment rate has already reached 25%. Approximately 50% of fresh graduates are suffering emotionally. This is because in the least developed countries, skills are not given enough emphasis in the educational programs. Even students are having problems in finding internships. The Canadian government is paying students during the pandemic. The most worrying thing is that almost 10 million people have lost their jobs in Bangladesh. The sectors that have been particularly affected by the pandemic are food, services, construction, manufacturing, and retail. The RMG sector also suffered. Already, USD 3.1 billion worth of export orders have been canceled or postponed; a lot of people have lost their jobs and the BGMEA president has already declared that they will lay-off more workers. According to the report published by the Centre for Policy Dialogue in 2018, 60.8% of
workers in the RMG sector were women\textsuperscript{6}. So the lay-offs will affect more women workers in the garments sector. This will make large numbers of women in society jobless and dependent on their male partners. The ongoing employability depends on acquiring continuously changing competencies. It is a must to acquire competency to fit in the new circumstance and new challenges. To keep pace with the competitive world, skill enhancing training needs to be introduced in the primary level of education continuing till tertiary level of education. The vocational education system should be given more importance. The young generation must be trained in a way that apart from emotional intelligence, they can also practice soft skills, deal with uncertainties etc.

**Key recommendations**

The key actors in dealing with employment issues during and after the pandemic are government institutions, entrepreneurs, public and private job sectors, multinational corporations, tech and online based marketing companies etc.

**Short-Term Measures**

- There can be a mapping study within the shortest period of time in Bangladesh to identify different sectors that have been affected by the pandemic. The mapping study can identify the major problems these sectors are currently facing and also provide some recommendations.

- Marginalized groups, youth and micro-businesses should be prioritized in stimulus packages.

- Government actors, business communities and academia can work closely to develop a strategic plan to help pandemic affected job sectors, develop alternative employment generation plans and provide stimulus packages to them.

- In the relief and stimulus packages, the gig economy and informal micro-enterprises should be acknowledged.

**Medium-Term Measures**

- The existing job and skill development training centres need to develop new plans and programmes to provide skills

development training to the graduates to determine their career goals in the post-pandemic situation. Students need proper guidance and coaching in this regard.

- Universities in this concern can initiate career development and counselling activities, even online, to provide career guidance to students.

- Short-term demand-based career training programmes can be initiated at universities as well as at public and private training institutes.

- Faculty members can develop collaborative projects with companies to ensure online based internships for students during the pandemic.

- Encourage volunteerism for the students and youth community. However, considering the socio-economic conditions, some student volunteers can be provided with monthly stipends to help them to deal with the Covid-19 related economic shocks during the pandemic.

**Long-Term Measures**

- Students must consider the reality that after completing their degrees, they will be in difficulties regarding finding a job during this pandemic. Therefore, this is a time to adopt further skills to reduce the uncertainties of future employment. For example, some sectors have created new job opportunities i.e., supply chain and online delivery, as many people are depending on online shopping. In Bangladesh, many students have started mentoring, online schooling and volunteering. This pandemic has taught us that finding a job is very tough in this situation, but still, the students should keep going. There is no reason to lose hope because there are still opportunities available, and universities should think about how to help them by providing them with the necessary skills and capabilities. In this, alumni associations of universities should be engaged in providing job opportunities, internships, voluntary work and setting up training centres for students.

- Alternative employment opportunities should be set up, including online based service delivery and marketing of industrial and agricultural products. In this, language, accounting and management skills for the young graduates should be promoted. There is already a growing need in the industrial sector for IT experts and industrial engineering graduates.
• Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) can be introduced for university level students. TVET providing institutions can work closely with universities to develop new soft skills, and technical and vocational training courses, to prepare youth for work in the future.

7. Concluding Remarks

Temporary closure of higher education institutions due to the Covid-19 pandemic is no longer news. In fact, all countries have stopped face-to-face teaching. The disruption of education created new challenges for university administrations, government authorities, families and societies. The reality is that in the majority of cases, there have been no contingencies and long-term policies other than attempts to continue the classes remotely via online methods. Hopefully, this policy paper will stimulate discussions and dialogues, and create opportunities for new research and activities, with the objective of dealing with the challenges facing higher education during and after the Covid-19 pandemic.
Annexure: 1

Report of the E-Assembly

on

Covid-19 Pandemic and Higher Education: Challenges and Beyond

Date: 17-18\textsuperscript{th} June 2020
Venue: E-Assembly at Zoom Virtual Platform.

Background of the E-Assembly:

The recent outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has caused enormous sufferings to the people of almost all the countries across the globe. People around the world are forced to maintain social distancing while governments of many countries continue enforcing lockdown of cities, towns and villages. The higher education sector has also been affected due to the outbreak of the pandemic as universities remain closed for an indefinite period of time, mainly to ensure the safety of the students, faculty members and teaching staff. This is clearly affecting the future of the students at the higher education level. Education needs to continue facing all these challenges. Learning and gaining knowledge should be continued at all costs for the betterment of our current and future generations. But then, there is the big challenge of how education can reach every student across the globe with adequate safety measures and equitable justice.

The ‘3\textsuperscript{rd} E-Assembly on Covid-19 Pandemic and Higher Education: Challenges and Beyond’ was jointly organized by the Center for Genocide Study (CGS), University of Dhaka and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), Bangladesh on 17-18\textsuperscript{th} June 2020 at the Zoom Virtual Platform.

Core Objectives of the E-Assembly:

1. Offers a platform to panel members from across the globe to address their concerns and suggest ways forward to overcome the crisis, with particular reference to the tertiary education sector;
2. Encourages participation from various disciplines in the debates of higher education in pandemic;

**Participants:**

Distinguished individuals from various educational institutions of both home and abroad participated in the E-Assembly on ‘Covid-19 Pandemic and Higher Education: Challenges and Beyond’. Participants from national and international universities and well reputed institutions like University of Dhaka, Johns Hopkins University, USA, University College London, UK, IT for Change, India, University of Cambridge, UK, University Grants Commission (UGC) Bangladesh spoke in four sessions at the two-day E-Assembly. Altogether, 400 people participated in the e-assembly at Zoom Virtual Platform. The assembly was live streamed on the CGS official Facebook page. The Assembly was widely viewed in the Facebook live stream. Around 8,000 viewers on average spent three hours per day to watch the e-assembly on Facebook live.

**Panel 1: Protection from the Pandemic**

Date: 17 June 2020 (Wednesday), Time: 6.00-8.22 PM  
Venue: E-Assembly at Zoom Virtual Platform.

On the first day, discussions were held in two different panels. The first panel addressed the issue of ‘Protection from the Pandemic’ and the second panel discussed ‘Digitalizing Higher Education’.

**Opening Remarks**

The E-Assembly started with the opening remarks of Dr. Imtiaz Ahmed, Professor of International Relations and Director, Center for Genocide Studies, University of Dhaka. He cited the contemporary situation around the world owing to the Covid-19 pandemic. It is quite complex to go through the local, national, regional and global levels while discussing the pandemic. Therefore, the whole discussion focused on higher education during Covid-19. Afterwards, he gave a brief
overview of the four different panels that were to take place in two days. The first panel focused on the protection of students and faculty members. Speakers from the UK, USA and Bangladesh were included to speak on how things are being played out regionally and globally. The second panel was on Digitalizing Higher Education, which particularly focused on how to connect with your peers, faculty members and students during the pandemic, what kind of education we are talking about, the arguments for and against digitizing education, and what kind of research they are thinking about. According to Dr. Imtiaz Ahmed, no one particular discipline alone can answer these questions; so, we have to go beyond disciplines to see what kind of research can flow from the post-disciplinary research perspective during the pandemic. Quoting Einstein, he said every crisis creates an opportunity. Then, Dr. Imtiaz Ahmed invited the chief guest, Professor Dr. Md. Akhtaruzzaman, Honorable Vice-Chancellor of the University of Dhaka, to deliver his speech.

Speech by the Chief Guest

Professor Dr. Md. Akhtaruzzaman started with remembering Father of the Nation Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Then, he paid his respects to the Covid-19 affected people while thanking the front-liners, particularly doctors, nurses, paramedics, cleaners and medical personnel for saving the lives of millions. He also thanked those people who, during this pandemic, are upholding humanitarian values with their helping hands and are doing incredible jobs. He thanked the organizers for choosing a very timely and important topic on Covid-19 and its impacts on higher education. Honorable Vice-Chancellor, on behalf of the University of Dhaka, particularly thanked Dr. Imtiaz Ahmed and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), Bangladesh office for holding the E-conference and creating this platform to bring together distinguished scholars from different parts of the globe. He expressed his gratitude to the distinguished scholars for their participation in the E-Assembly. It is true that the Covid-19 pandemic has affected each and every aspect of our lives, and to some extent, our existent is threatened, he stated.

In his speech, Professor Dr. Md. Akhtaruzzaman said that the outbreak of Covid-19 has caused the greatest disruption that the world has experienced in a century. Universities remained closed for an indefinite period of time, including schools and other educational institutions across the world. It has affected more than 1.5 billion students, which is 90 percent of the total enrolled students of the globe. Although the educational institutions had to be shut down, this precaution ensured the safety of nations across the world. In light of such impacts on education, it is time to search for
suitable alternatives. He said, the era we are witnessing is commonly known as the new normal. So, to cope with this new normal situation, new measures need to be adopted and suitable alternatives have to be sorted out. As long as mankind prevails, education needs to face all the challenges and continue. Indeed, learning and earning knowledge should be continued at all costs for the betterment of current and future generations, although it is a big challenge to reach every student across the globe. Considering the crisis, he said that the University of Dhaka is working to develop IT infrastructure for online modes of education that are suitable for both teachers and students. He added that the university had already requested colleagues to conduct online classes with limited resources and logistics to keep the students engaged in the education sphere. We need to keep in mind that an idle brain is the devil’s workshop. So, we need to make the maximum use of this time. He added that active engagement in professional affairs is essential. Undoubtedly, technology has given us this wonderful opportunity to continue our education and overcome disruptions. He also mentioned some challenges faced, like how it has created a divide between the rich and the financially challenged students. He said the risks of providing classroom education and the unfortunate challenges in the post-pandemic situation, mainly the funding opportunities and employment challenges of graduated students, should be considered and plans should be made and acted upon accordingly.

Furthermore, he said that we need to keep in mind that we are at the initial stage of the outbreak. While the global slogan was once ‘stay home, save lives’, now it has changed to ‘stay alert, control the virus’. This gives us a clear signal that we can no longer keep ourselves confined in houses and we need to get engaged in work. We have to coordinate between life and livelihood for the betterment of our future generations. Professor Dr. Md. Akhtaruzzaman said that the government of Bangladesh, under the prudent and dynamic leadership of Honorable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, is firmly committed to implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) by 2030. Therefore, the education sector, particularly in the universities, also need to be very firmly committed to ensure the achievement of the SDGs, particularly goal 4 that states ensuring equitable and quality education and promoting life-long learning opportunities for all. He also said that recently, Dhaka University had decided to update the curriculum, and Deans and faculty members have been requested to update their respective curriculum so that each and every target and goal are addressed properly by the concerned academic disciplines.
He mentioned that the Honorable Secretary General of the United Nations had expressed his hope to have a meeting with the Vice Chancellors of the world in the Headquarters of the United Nations. The event will be organized by Columbia University. The main objective of that conference with the Secretary General is to convey the message that universities have the obligation to help their respective governments and nations in achieving the SDGs. Now, we need to be very precise and focused without wasting time, as 2030 is not far away. So, each month and each week is very precious for the university community. To continue this commitment, we need to act just now. Universities, particularly the University of Dhaka, are making all-out efforts to this direction, he said.

Professor Dr. Md. Akhtaruzzaman expressed his hope that the four different panels of the two days long E-Assembly will focus on some important issues, particularly digitalizing higher education and inter-disciplinary research during the pandemic, which is highly needed. Given the gravity of the situation, there will be necessary and major shifts in the way of learning and its challenges for the entire world. The transformation will shift from the traditional face to face teaching-learning model to ICT enabled online-based education. Today’s children and young people are global citizens, powerful agents of change and the next generation of caregivers, scientists and doctors. He said that the E-Assembly on higher education and Covid-19 will create an immense opportunity to work with fellow participants and search for some more effective alternative ways to continue education. He also hoped that after two days, the E-Assembly will come up with valuable recommendations, comments and suggestions that will help policymakers, respective governments and university management in formulating policy and measures. He joked that in this new normal, there will be no need to face traffic jams that will make us late for everything, which is happy news. However, the downside is that we will be losing face to face interactions.

Professor Dr. Md. Akhtaruzzaman concluded with his belief that the pandemic will not last for long, as human beings are more powerful than any pandemic. However, he emphasized the need to make the best use of time. He ended with thanking Dr. Imtiaz Ahmed and Tina Marie Blohm for cooperating with the University of Dhaka, particularly with the Center for Genocide Studies. He expressed his best wishes to all the participants, distinguished scholars from UCL, Johns Hopkins University, USA, panelists, viewers, listeners, participants, the panel guests, the audience and the contributors. He expressed his gratitude for being invited to inaugurate the E-Assembly, and finally declared the two-day E-Assembly open.
Vote of Thanks

Ms. Tina Marie Blohm, Resident Representative of Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), Bangladesh, delivered the vote of thanks. She thanked the Honorable Vice-Chancellor for his impressive speech. She acknowledged that the speech of the Vice-Chancellor reminded us that education is the prime concern right now. She argued that education should be prioritized, alongside other concerns, with a focus on not only education but quality education, which is inclusive for a lot of people. Again, she thanked the Honorable Vice-Chancellor for perfectly setting the scene for the next discussion panels.

She also added that she personally felt honored to be a part of the E-assembly. The first thing she highlighted is looking at how this new normal should be and how we can create a better new normal. The second thing she said was that the valuable twelve speakers were going to help to rethink what we already have in our minds. She thanked all the speakers for managing the time to join the two-day long E-Assembly. Thirdly, she thanked the audiences for joining, both on Zoom and Facebook. Her last words were for Professor Imtiaz Ahmed. She mentioned that he never missed a new idea at any point and it had been a great pleasure to work with him. Then she thanked CGS and FES colleagues for making the e-assembly happen.

Paper I

Professor Veena Das, Dept. of Anthropology, Johns Hopkins University, USA, was the first presenter of Panel 1. She flagged three important questions considering the pandemic situation.
1. What kind of methodology are universities subject to take, after becoming vulnerable from the effects of the pandemic?
2. Students have always been a very dynamic element of universities. What kind of responsibilities do students and faculties have in this particular period of time?
3. How can we think about critique while surviving in uncertainty?

She highlighted two particular pathologies about the first question. One is the kind of neoliberalized projects in which what was considered to be successful was in fact not; emphasising not on what kind of knowledge is being produced but on how rankings are influenced by this knowledge production. She also spoke of how in the last ten years, there was a complete
substitution in many universities from seriously considering what kind of research needs to be done and how to take this forward, by the idea that rankings need to be improved. The rankings game is very influential, and the kind of impacts this ranking game has are also important. She said scientists have anticipated that the pandemic can happen at any time, but they were not sure when it would happen. In this Covid-19 period, there have been a huge amount of publications and she argued that we need to think of the kind of implications that are being produced by all of this work. She referred to the contexts of the USA and India as examples. If universities survive, they will not only survive by finding technology for online teaching; rather they will survive for their critical perspectives. Education has to go through some kind of critical perspective. She added that we should think about what kind of responsibilities we can ask our students to take in this period. She gave the example of the impact of the earthquake in Pakistan and how unborn and young children had a permanent deficit owing to this. The main problem caused by the online classes could be that parents with little or no education will face difficulties in helping their children with homework as the local tuition centers are closed. She expressed her concerns about the impact of intra-house inequality regarding education. The third thing she focused on was how Covid-19 has affected the Rohingya camps. Considering the Covid-19 pandemic, the social and economic inequalities are absolutely fundamental to examine. How has Covid-19 imposed inequalities? She concluded by saying that every pandemic creates an opportunity.

**Paper II**

Titled “Protection from the pandemic: Particularly in Higher Education”, Paper II was presented by Professor A. S. M. Maksud Kamal, Dept. of Disaster Science and Management, University of Dhaka. He started addressing the six phases of the pandemic as described by the World Health Organization (WHO). Then, he highlighted some figures regarding higher education in Bangladesh. He mentioned that there are 46 functional public universities in Bangladesh that accommodate 0.28 million students and around 96 functional private universities accommodating 0.29 million students. He added that the rest of the students belong to Open University (Distance Education), National University (Non-research University Colleges), theological Islamic Arabic University, etc. Out of this, 20 public universities are pursuing online (partial) classes/education in this pandemic situation. Then, he highlighted the responses of Dhaka University regarding health protection during the pandemic. The activities he mentioned was the university forming the Corona Response Committee in March, preparing and distributing hand sanitizers, strengthening
tele-medicine activities and launching a counselling lab. Dr. Kamal stated the financial hardships and societal issues faced by some students, and argued for extending support to the economically challenged students and providing support for Covid testing. He also stressed on the protection of education and some major causes behind not preferring online classes. Moreover, he described the support provided by the University of Dhaka at the national level during the pandemic. Later, he shared some important lessons learned during the pandemic and some issues that need to be addressed to overcome the situation. He also described some major aspects for protecting education at the local, regional and global levels by the reduction of tuition fees, creating part-time job opportunities, arranging education loans, increasing the number of scholarships and also by strengthening the involvement of Alumni. Finally, he emphasized on some issues that are important for continuing online education in the global South.

**Paper III**

Professor Peter Sammonds, Department of Earth Sciences, University College London, UK was the third presenter of Panel I. The presenter started with sharing the general UK experience on the pandemic. Then, he spoke about the ranking game and government funding for the UK universities. British universities were closed a week before the general lockdown. The student dormitories were closed and students had to shift to private accommodation. The public health services in the UK that guided the universities were influenced by political decisions. Even though the UK had a plan based upon flu, the pandemic was still extremely challenging. At the beginning, the UK faced the problem of testing a large number of people and controlling a very high death toll. The issues of social interaction and mental health are at the front-line of disruptions. Universities would be the agent of their own coming out of the lockdown. The best thing universities can do at this particular stage is online learning or the use of a blended learning process rather than regular face-to-face learning.

**Question(s)/ Answer(s)/ Comment(s)**

1. Covid-19 has not only impacted the household budget of poor, vulnerable and disadvantaged socio-economic groups across the world, but it has changed socio-economic, demographic, psychological and mental health conditions and restricting the poorest household’s education
as they need to invest more on healthcare and maintain their livelihood. E-education will bring a total disaster to the education system. How can this particular situation be addressed?

**Ans:** Professor Veena Das, Dept. of Anthropology, Johns Hopkins University, USA, responded by saying that you can go fixing if we are unable to reach the pandemic have blindness. We need to provide proper safety to students. The online education is sometimes only about getting fees. We should instead opt for synchronous learning if the digital divide is not a greater consequence and we can actually boost the opportunity. Not simply to think I agree with Peter on the other hand this is the fact that they have to look after their family.

2. How to get rid of the ranking game?

**Ans:** Ranking is used as a commercial divide among universities, based on which students make decisions on where to get admitted. Depending on ranking, universities are charging very high tuition fees. It may take time to get rid of the ranking game.

3. When almost 50% are not preferring online education, then will it be equitable for some departments/institutes to still go for that? What measures have you taken to make a level playing field, before a full run for online?

**Ans.** Rightly pointed out. It’s hard to bring all the students under online platforms in a highly stratified society. We have to enhance capacity and resources and be equipped with digital devices.
Panel 2: Digitalizing Higher Education
Date: 17 June 2020 (Wednesday), Time: 8.30-10.00 PM
Venue: E-Assembly at Zoom Virtual Platform

Paper IV

Professor Dr. Md. Sazzad Hossain, Member, University Grants Commission (UGC) Bangladesh, spoken in panel 2 on ‘Digitalizing Higher Education’. At the beginning, he shared some in-depth thoughts on how digitizing higher education has now become part and parcel of the modern era. He stated that the path to enlightenment and seeking knowledge has never been smooth from the beginning of civilization. Universities, the centers of knowledge, also have their own history, for example: political movements, conspiracies or sometimes natural disasters have hampered educational activities. He said that the global coronavirus pandemic has also put us in a difficult situation. According to him, after observing the helpless state of the world, it is imperative to make our education more realistic. In this regard, we have to make the best use of existing information and communication technology. Therefore, online education or e-learning would be a suitable solution in any crisis. He then described the positive aspects of e-learning. He pointed out why it is important to pay attention to e-education and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the education sector. Referring to UNESCO, he mentioned that educational institutions in 130 countries of the world have been declared closed. He mentioned that UGC have already organized some surveys among the universities in Bangladesh regarding the prospects of launching an online education system, and the UGC is yet to develop policies regarding conducting online exams. He referred to the e-learning approach of Zhejiang University, China as an example of reducing the digital divide. He stressed that considering the contemporary pandemic situation, an e-learning system should be prioritized to reduce future uncertainties. He concluded by explaining the feasibility of e-learning in Bangladesh.

Paper V

Mr. Gurumurthy Kasinathan, Founder and Director, IT for Change, India was the second presenter of panel 2. He started by highlighting that the purpose of education is to set up democracy in the world, where there is liberty, equality, justice and prosperity. Then, referring to John Dewey and Gandhi, he stressed that the purpose of education is not the communication of knowledge but the
sharing of social experiences, so that individuals can become integrated into the democratic community. Citing Freyd, he said that education is the method of transforming the lives of the marginalized. He tried to portray the socio-economic structures of countries like India and Bangladesh, where large proportions of the world’s marginalized people live. Therefore, he said, before digitalizing education, we have to ensure that such types of education is meaningful for the marginalized; if it does not take on meaning for diverse Bangladeshi and Indian groups, that education is useless. From a pessimistic point of view, he said, people in the contemporary world are living under high socio-economic inequality and global warming. Only young people have the courage to think innovatively about how the world can be a better place, and universities are the place to create such persons. Then, he said that the education curriculum has turned into a job-acquiring medium. He acknowledged that every crisis presents an opportunity, although the most important thing that we need is to develop technological infrastructure to make sure that everybody has access to digital education. He ended up with conceptualizing the essence of equity in accessing digital education, which is the prime concern in the contemporary situation.

Paper VI

Professor Piers Bursill-Hall, Department of Pure Mathematics, Centre for Mathematical Sciences, Cambridge, UK was the third speaker of panel 2. He started with saying that he is not interested to talk about poverty, racism, sexism, and other issues around the world. Rather, he is interested to look at the opportunities. He said, teachers and students are being forced to go online. He himself has already conducted 34 lectures online. Most of us are beginners in online university education, so there are definitely some bad lectures on Zoom. He also mentioned that we have experienced many odd things during Zoom lectures as universities are closed. He acknowledged that the pandemic is forcing us to go through rapid changes. If there is a successful vaccine in the next six months, then it will take at least another six months to spread the vaccine across the globe. He went on to outline the upside of online lectures. He said that they have gone online because most journals are online as physical copies are expensive. More and more research are going on, although challenges are being faced by medical publishers. He asked, why do we put all our lectures online? So that we can globalize education in every part. He asked, why don’t you demand low costs for introduction to group theory? He explained how education can be digitalized as well as globalized by creating a global connection. He said, education can be globalized by demanding
the transfer of learning technology. There should be a common language like English so that universities around the world can exchange their reading materials. He said it will be easy to get courses from Italian and Dutch universities, and many more. Western universities are also being faced by an economic crisis caused by the pandemic. Universities in Bangladesh should ask the top universities to share lecture materials. When you have libraries from around the world, you will get development. He referred to the importance of alternative methods that can help students. He proposed a new option of demanding the mutual sharing of teaching materials around the globe. He particularly focused on the importance of sharing resources to improve the quality of knowledge acquisition. According to him, sharing e-learning materials will reduce the existing knowledge gap between the global North and South. He finished his presentation by suggesting that the entire global situation must be seen from the perspective of opportunity creation to make the best use of time.

**Question(s)/ Answer(s)/ Comment(s)**

1. Is it possible to get globalized education in a country like Bangladesh?

   **Ans.** You have to make that demand. You need to make committees, form commissions and talk to the government and it might take years. We need to have university departments that talk to other university departments. Demand it and try it, otherwise you won’t get it [Professor Piers Bursill-Hall, Department of Pure Mathematics, Centre for Mathematical Sciences, Cambridge, UK].

2. Does UGC have any concrete roadmap on how to handle online education for all the universities of Bangladesh? We know the existing problems in conducting digital education but I can’t find any solutions or directions from your presentation at all.

   **Ans.** Yes, UGC is in the process of formulating the roadmap for online education [Professor Dr Md Sazzad Hossain, Member, University Grants Commission (UGC) Bangladesh].
3. A great number of students of the state-run universities of Bangladesh belong to the rural, underdeveloped, underprivileged areas of the countryside; such remote locations don’t really offer the decent internet connection required to attend classes through online platforms. Even if the UGC comes up with a well-structured digitized program to continue academic activities all over the country, how does it plan to handle this issue of network availability?

**Ans.** UGC is working to develop a model to reach out to unprivileged students [Professor Dr. Md. Sazzad Hossain, Member, University Grants Commission (UGC) Bangladesh].

**Panel 3: Post-disciplinary Research during Pandemic**
Date: 18 June 2020 (Thursday), Time: 6.00-7.30 PM  
Venue: E-Assembly at Zoom Virtual Platform

On the second day, discussions were held in two different panels. The third panel addressed the issue of ‘Post-disciplinary Research during the Pandemic’ and the fourth panel discussed ‘Pandemic and Employment Opportunities’.

**Paper VII**

Professor Sohail Inayatullah from Tamkang University, Taipei and Futures Chair, UNESCO, Australia, presented the paper ‘Using the future to innovate: A trans-disciplinary approach’. In his paper, he discussed four different traditions—empirical, interpretive, critical and action research or learning. From the future learning context, he spoke about plans in a closed universe, learning to learn and narrative learning. Referring to Prof. Kuo-Hua Chen, he spoke about futures literacy, describing trans-disciplinary thinking, openness to alternatives, being more optimistic about the future, choices and agency. He presented arguments on seven narrative assumptions including conspirituals, blaming someone else, slowing the spread, finding the cure and vaccine, watching out for the next disease, financial crisis and creating the platform economy, and climate change and global governance. He emphasized on the significance of inner awakening and external awakening. He also said that this pandemic has awakened the global health system. Then, he shared
some lessons he learned from his project on Covid-19, including speeding up the preferred future, protecting the weak, innovating to grow, creating flexibility and well-being. He also described the implications of the Covid-19 scenario, referring to the government of Egypt. He mentioned that 50% of all Malaysian universities are likely to go bankrupt, students in Australian universities may not return for years and faculties are getting less salary than before. He explained different theoretical aspects, and shared some future lessons from Covid-19 for educational institutions, like creating alternatives and new narratives.

**Paper VIII**

Professor Syed Manzoorul Islam, Dept. of English, University of Dhaka spoke about the contemporary scenario in Bangladesh and its consequences for the future. He spoke about negotiating with the government to increase funding for research, and expressed concerns about the future development of research sectors. Research during the pandemic has become more prominent. Giving the example of the Covid-19 pandemic, he said that most countries could not discover the vaccine due to the lack of financial patronage. In social science, economics, environment and business, there is some market research. Then, he distinguished between pure research and studies, arguing that even if universities switch from traditional learning to hybrid or blended learning, funding would still be needed to digitize the education system. For Bangladesh, it is a very lucrative concept at the moment. He expressed his worries about the online teaching system, particularly in public universities, saying that online-based higher education in Bangladesh will face many challenges like poor logistics, poor internet connectivity and many students living in the rural areas. He mentioned that considering the cultural, economic and geographical factors, it is not possible to apply the research of one country to another, especially in social sciences. Then, he articulated some major challenges to conducting research in the post-pandemic situation. He spoke about the downside of developing an e-education system in the context of Bangladesh. Considering all these issues, conducting online classes might be unethical. Dr. Manzoor defined the influential factors for not preferring online classes and how the e-learning process will create digital divisions among students in Bangladesh. He concluded by explaining the concerns of basic research in the post-pandemic scenario.
Paper IX

Professor Liyan Zhang, Director, Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship, Tianjin University of Finance and Economics, spoke about ‘Post-disciplinary Research during Pandemic: Possible Topics’. She stressed on the new normal before the vaccines and drugs are developed, describing opportunities for certain enterprises, such as online business, meetings, teaching, training, etc. She also spoke about the appearance of new forms of employment, for example, selling live broadcasts, adding value to policy and social marketing. Then, she briefly spoke about social governance issues like balancing pandemic prevention/control and people’s return to normal life. She mentioned the impact of the information people are receiving from different channels on individual behavior. Then, she gave detailed information concerning both direct and indirect effects of the pandemic on GDP, livelihoods and employment. As described by her, the direct factors of impact are imports and exports, outdoor activities, willingness of consumption and investment, consumption of masks, disinfectants, drugs etc. On the other hand, she analyzed the indirect impacts, like unreasonable behavior of people facing high uncertainty and imperfect information during the pandemic; for example, hiding the facts of visiting virus areas, not visiting hospitals in time etc. According to her, these behaviors may increase the infection rates and bring uncertainty to the economy. She completed her presentation by arguing that interdisciplinary research will help avoid the negative externalities.

Question(s)/ Answer(s)/ Comment(s)

1. We are having this webinar in Bangladesh, so what kind of lesson we can get in our country as you described in the context of Australia?
   Ans. Choice one is everyone shows solidarity and everyone takes a pay cut, given the income rule drop for at least one year. Choice two is you force people to leave, you fire people and you innovate [Professor Sohail Inayatullah at Tamkang University, Taipei and Futures Chair, UNESCO, Australia].

2. What about the future of the universities in developing countries like Bangladesh, especially in the public universities?
Ans. Planning for the future is good when you have times that are stable, but when you are going through such an unstable situation, futures are uncertain [Professor Sohail Inayatullah at Tamkang University, Taipei and Futures Chair, UNESCO, Australia].

3. I would ask the speaker to say a bit about lessons learned from the Philippine Senate. I think he skipped it.

Ans. It’s better to plan for different Futures. Planning for different aspects is far better than one, which is what Australia is doing [Professor Sohail Inayatullah at Tamkang University, Taipei and Futures Chair, UNESCO, Australia].

4. I’m wondering how best do you think those from STEM subjects can seek to support other subject areas? I completely agree in regard to how excellence within STEM does deeply rely on funding and even status to an extent. With the current pandemic, we have increasingly been seeing science informing other areas, even if it has been happening a bit late in some countries. I’m keen to understand what might be the best way for the research community to move forward together in terms of laying the groundwork for future multi-disciplinary approaches and broader access to funding and research, which need to be launched on the basis of humanitarian grounds and not merely on career grounds, especially in an unprecedented time as we are in now.

Ans. Each discipline has to be understood from the aspect of different disciplines. Technology is unevenly distributed, which must be reduced. We have to humanize science. We also need to redefine research.

5. China has been successful in addressing the pandemic. What suggestion would Liyan provide to the rest of the world? [Professor Ashok Swain, PhD, Dept. of Peace and Conflict Research and Director, Research School of International Water Cooperation, Uppsala University].
**Ans.** The people in China followed the rules of social distancing, and followed all the health rules [Professor Liyan Zhang Professor and Director, Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship, Tianjin University of Finance and Economics].

Panel 4: Pandemic and Employment Opportunities  
**Date:** 18 June 2020 (Thursday), **Time:** 8.00-9.40 PM  
**Venue:** E-Assembly at Zoom Virtual Platform

**Paper X**

Professor Syed Munir Khasru, Chairman, The Institute for Policy, Advocacy, and Governance (IPAG) and Professor, IBA, University of Dhaka presented the paper titled ‘Covid-19 Economic and Employment Crisis: The Challenges Ahead’. He started his presentation by saying that the entire world is facing huge uncertainties. He discussed the global disruption created by the Covid-19 outbreak, such as the economic disruption, impacts on the global market, unemployment etc. He reiterated that the Covid-19 outbreak has caused an unprecedented disruption to the global economy, and expressed the concern that the world might fall into a recession far worse than the global financial crisis. Already, the pandemic induced downturn has caused world trade to decline by 27%. This may cause huge joblessness, both for domestic and migrant workers. Professor Khasru presented a comparative analysis on the contemporary scenario of the impacts of Covid-19 on major economies like Japan, China and USA, and also in major South Asian economies like Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. Countries like the USA, Japan and China have responded to Covid-19 by investing in public health, forming social safety nets, distributing relief packages, providing cheap loans to companies etc. Even South Asian countries have taken initiatives like relief packages for the poor and reduced interest rates. He also spoke about the adverse impacts of Covid-19 on the job market in the more powerful economies as well as in the South Asian economies. He showed some statistical figures on the impacts of Covid-19 in Bangladesh. As he described, in Bangladesh, the major impacts are the disruption in production and supply chains, as the RMG sector has faced order cancellations, workers have lost jobs, declarations of further employment cuts have been made by the BGMEA, and a large number of overseas workers are facing wage cuts or not being paid at all over the past few months.
Paper XI

Professor Imran Rahman, Former Vice Chancellor, University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh, spoke about the difficulties of finding a job during the pandemic. He also spoke about the difficulties of online classes like psychological pressure, student’s accessibility to modern technologies and skill of the faculty members in going online. On top of that, after getting their degrees, students will also face difficulties in finding employment. He said, it is high time that students are taught to develop skills to reduce the uncertainties of future employment. By contrast, there are some sectors which have created new job opportunities during the pandemic; for example, supply chain and online delivery, as many people are depending on online shopping. Young people should help themselves to find different opportunities during the pandemic. In Bangladesh, many students have started mentoring, online schooling and volunteering. This pandemic has taught us that finding a job is very tough in this situation, but still students should keep going. There is nothing to be hopeless about because there are still opportunities and young people have to help themselves by gathering skills and capabilities.

Paper XII

Professor Ashok Swain, PhD, Dept. of Peace and Conflict Research and Director, Research School of International Water Cooperation, Uppsala University, stated that the world has seen many pandemics, but this time a huge number of people have lost their jobs across the globe. From a pessimistic point of view, he expressed his concern about the impact of this pandemic on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). He mentioned that countries in the South are going to face harsh economic challenges, so we need to develop some strategies without deciding which are going to be successful or unsuccessful. He added that there is a lack of global solidarity and global leadership, and at this moment, we need a leader at the global level. Globally, the democratic decline has created major problems, including in South Asia. According to him, the contemporary global system is passing through political and economic complexities, including in South Asia and the Middle East. He said, food for education can never be the solution to problems; rather, we have to concentrate more on reducing child labor. Around the world, there are a number of students who have lost their jobs and internships, and it’s not that easy for social science students to get a job. We are also receiving confusing messages from economic and political leaders. Ways should be found to keep the students focused in this difficult time by encouraging students and engaging
them socially. He concluded by saying that we need to reach out to our faculties as well as students to find the best solutions to problems during this pandemic.

Question(s)/ Answer(s)/ Comment(s)

1. If we cannot rely on the garments sector then what is the next best thing to rely on? What are the alternative educational opportunities? Taiwan has become the center for mutual funds. Is it possible to create our own funds and jobs for the youth?

   **Ans.** Firstly, it could be the agricultural sector. Secondly, despite being a country with 160 million people, Indian and Nepalese workers are taking the place of Bangladeshis in the Middle East job markets because of their English expertise. We should greatly concentrate in this sector. Thirdly, technical vocational education or skill development programs are needed. Fourthly, young people should think a little out of the box and not just about regular internships. Young people should think creatively to reduce the problems of employment. [Syed Munir Khasru, Chairman, The Institute for Policy, Advocacy, and Governance (IPAG) and Professor, IBA, University of Dhaka].

2. What is the necessity of ‘Tracer Study’ and where do we stand in terms of generating such studies and getting its benefits - especially in bridging the industry-academia gap?

   **Ans.** Tracer studies are not useful in Bangladesh. Agri-processing or agri-business could be a way out [Professor Imran Rahman, Former Vice-Chancellor, University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh].

3. What should be the role of government regarding employment?

   **Ans.** The role of the government is extremely important. In this situation, the government should also be in every sector so that there is always someone who can take the responsibility [Professor Imran Rahman, Former Vice-Chancellor, University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh].

4. What opportunities would there be in the agricultural sector? Particularly, how could women be affected due to the impact of Covid-19 in the agricultural sector?
**Ans.** From the conflict and peace-building approach, when there is a crisis, there is economic breakdown. To overcome this, you will need to divert your concentration from agriculture to industrial purposes to make more money. Globally, there is a possibility to divert things more towards the industrial sector. The secessionist moment can happen both in democracy and autocracy [Professor Ashok Swain, PhD, Dept. of Peace and Conflict Research and Director, Research School of International Water Cooperation, Uppsala University].

**Ans.** Governments can contribute by providing information on agri-business and farming. There are many certificate courses in Nepal to develop skills in different sectors and go abroad with different skills [Professor Imran Rahman, Former Vice-Chancellor, University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh].

5. Do you think the pandemic situation is going to impact the rights of women workers in the agricultural sector?

**Ans.** As the pandemic has also impacted the agricultural sector, it has great influence upon the rights of women workers [Professor Imran Rahman, Former Vice-Chancellor, University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh].

6. What should students do about their concerns regarding future employment?

**Ans.** Most of the companies are freezing their recruitment. Still, there are huge demands for data engineering and IT based supply chain management, and huge demands in the health sector. Necessity is the mother of invention. Students have to be trained and the government should have dialogues with faculties, people in the community and legislative authorities to come up with suggestions [Dr. Samsunnahar].

7. What about the education sector? How can the education sector recover from the pandemic?

**Ans.** The education sector can survive by being adaptive during the pandemic. Schools should implement online classes instead of physical learning systems. [Professor Imran Rahman, Former Vice Chancellor, University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh].
Closing Remarks

Dr. Imtiaz Ahmed delivered the closing remarks. He said that all the presenters were wonderful and agreed that every crisis creates an opportunity. As an example, he said that this online platform has provided the opportunity to hear from some scholars and it has reached over 11,945 views online. Owing to the pandemic, many books are now available online, which is a great opportunity for students as well as faculties. He argued that today’s students need to get out of traditional thinking, and faculties in the public universities should also shoulder their share of the responsibilities. Based on this two-day discussion, he mentioned the production of a report on four different sessions, a policy paper and an e-publication (a compiled short video from the original six hours of video).

Positive Aspects of e-learning

- Firstly, it is a flexible mode of learning. In this process, students can learn anything from anywhere;
- Secondly, if anyone has to work and continue studying, he/she can have this advantage by watching the lessons at a more convenient time;
- If anyone faces any difficulties, she/he can repeat the videos to get a proper understanding of any particular topic;
- People can easily facilitate themselves with the convenience of online education;

Key Findings/Recommendations

- Risk assessment needs to be demography specific to address the socio-economic challenges faced by the marginalized populations of every category.
- At the micro-level, restarting vulnerable small businesses can ensure employment boosts to the economy at initial stages.
- Government and industry associations can facilitate alliances between large and small businesses so that SMEs can overcome the structural barriers.
- Government needs to ensure that SME’s, including informal micro-enterprises and gig economy workers, are included in relief and stimulus packages.
- Safeguarding and recreating jobs through targeted redeployment and re-skilling can offset the net effect of the employment lost in the post-pandemic world.
• Strong support from the government is required to make this digital education available to all students.
• UGC can develop a centralized plan for managing the higher educational needs of students.
• At the same time, concerned universities and their departments should develop their own decentralized models of managing online and ICT-enabled schooling systems.
• It is urgent to have unified e-learning platforms for all academic institutions. Educational institutions may subscribe to the “Blackboard” system through UGC or MoE. UGC can take the initiative to provide the Blackboard system to educational institutions. We are conducting all classes, exams etc. through it. Blackboard has hundreds of features to facilitate teaching and learning in Bangladesh.
• For students who are unable to attend classes online at the given time, the alternatives could be: a) sharing recorded classes; b) emailing students the lecture slides; or c) sharing the lecture slides on Facebook pages where all students of the class are connected.
• From now on, we must think about blending education systems.
• Guidelines on providing online education, more particularly on taking classes and exams, should be developed.
• Reduce economic disparity, exploitation and the caste problem.
• Train faculty members on e-learning processes.
• Absolute guidelines to evaluate the online learning system is required.
• Capacity building, fund generation, building sustainable partnerships and community engagement is essential to overcome existing challenges.
Rapporteur’s Report
Webinar on Covid-19 Pandemic and Digitalizing Higher Education
15 October 2020
Time: 6:30 PM
Venue: Zoom Platform

The jointly organized webinar by the Centre for Genocide Studies, University of Dhaka and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES), Bangladesh took place on Thursday, 15 October 2020, 6.30 PM to 8.30 PM (Bangladesh Standard Time - BST) The Chief Guest of the programme was Dr. A. S. M. Maksud Kamal, Professor and Pro-Vice Chancellor (Academic), University of Dhaka. The Keynote Speaker was Dr. Asif Hossain Khan, Professor of Department of Computer Science and Engineering, Faculty of Engineering and Technology, University of Dhaka and the Discussant was Mr. Anir Chowdhury, Policy Advisor, a2i, Innovate for all, Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh.

The program was Moderated by Professor Dr. Imtiaz Ahmed, Professor of International Relations & Director, Centre for Genocide Studies, University of Dhaka and Ms. Tina Marie Blohm, Resident Representative, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Bangladesh.

Rationale
The speaker, the discussant and the participants of the programme were well aware of the compulsion created by Covid-19 which forced everyone to digitize, even without proper resources or mandate. However, the rapid pace of digitization does not comply with the level of expectation, and therefore, around 3.9 million students are facing challenges. Till June 2020, around 20 public universities offered online classes. The complications, nevertheless, are more within the qualitative arena concerning the resources, the infrastructure and access to the available amenities. The Vision 2021 Master Plan of the Government of Bangladesh looks forward to addressing digital ramifications through the broader umbrella of National ICT Policy, ICT related education and policy options to improve learning quality all across the country. The learned participants agreed on the fact that the quest for development does not end with policy formulation; rather, it must comprehend the all-encompassing dimensions of pedagogies and investigate the challenges.
Challenges

- Only 5.6% of Bangladeshi households have computers. Ownership of television and personal computer devices is not very common. Penetration is also very low in the poorest areas. Broadband internet speed tends to be very low at 24.31 Mbps in general and 9.96 Mbps speed on mobile devices.
- Affordability of Internet is also an area to focus on. Internet connections in Bangladesh are usually cheap and affordable. However, due to the pandemic and a potential crisis of job loss, maintenance of the cost has become a non-trivial concern, especially in the low-income households.
- The right to education has been infiltrated by the issue of digital divide beyond and within the country. Compared to a student at Harvard University, a student of the University of Dhaka is not enjoying the same facilities. The divide has always been there in education.
- The concern of “divide” has been exacerbated by the ownership of digital device, access and payment. A person may have one but may not have another.
- Technological inequality also accelerates the class-divide persistent in education. Students from richer backgrounds are more skilled. On the other hand, male children have more privileges over female students.
- Another challenge is to reach out to a holistic population, particularly, the marginalized communities, the indigenous population, youth and the women. Concerning health vulnerabilities, dropout has become a major risk during the post pandemic period.
- The infrastructural capacities within the University of Dhaka campus had been responsible for the reason why many teachers were facing problems. Moreover, although Bangladesh Telecommunications Company Limited (BTCL) and Bangladesh Research and Education Network (BdREN) services may ensure larger accessibility, distributions are quite uneven. 3rd party service providers fail to provide quality-product and the connections are often poor or disrupting. Universities have to take pre-emptive measures - ethernet connections have to be replaced by optic fibre. The University also does not have any substantial Local Area Network (LAN) connectivity within the University premises.
To hinder the delay of year-end examinations and bring pertinent decision regarding the graduation process has become a burning question. There are serious problems to be in cognizance regarding the bi-semester schemes. Application for certificates and mark sheets from home should be available.

Even after providing monetary facilities, 100% attendance could not be ensured. Some of the classes have to be re-taken.

Admission processes have not been well-organized and eventual challenges will hit soon. Seemingly, there is a question of resource cuts.

Behavioural changes are required among the University professors in order to shift to the virtual platform (Mr. Chowdhury). Packages for the students are not properly institutionalized. The decision-makers have to chalk out whether the packages will be open to all the students, or just for the deserving ones who are in need.

Students seem to be more eager than the teachers when it comes to the question of attending online classes. Lack of training in digital pedagogy, assessing and assisting students.

The decision whether the long-term system has to be online or face-to-face or a mixture of both has to be prioritized.

The biggest problem is the mindset. It has to be noted that the private universities taking the lead while public universities are lagging behind.

Mobile companies have to ensure their internet network stability and rate of internet package conducive for all the students. Students from all walks of life are not getting proper opportunities due to the lack of smart phone devices, high price of data pack and slow speed of network across the country. Although Teletalk is providing data at cheaper rate than others mobile operator, its network does not have a good coverage across the whole country.

**Recommendations**

- Through enhanced communication with all the stakeholders, the Government must create stimulus packages for all.
- Universities should anticipate long-term cessation and design pedagogical measures accordingly. Hybrid education must accompany internal reflections in teaching and learning modes.
Available technical services/software like Microsoft Team, Zoom, Hangouts, Google Meet, DingTalk, Lark have to be explored. Digital learning management systems like Moodle, Muktopath, Century Tech, Class Dojo, Edmodo have to be properly utilized.

Other digital opportunities for students like EdX, Coursera, Canvas Network, Udemy, Ted-Ed Earth School and for teachers Thinglink, Buncee, Edpuzzle, Squig, Trello and phone tools like Cell Ed, Ustad Mobile, KaiOS, Funzi, Eneza education shall be taken into account as well.

There should be focus on alternative methods of assessment like assignment and presentation. Moreover, the teaching and evaluation process must reduce its dependence on written examination. Multiple Choice Questions should be used more than essay type.

It is a great time to address re-learning. Another creative area is to comprehend blended learning properly. Nonetheless, we must not lose what was gained from the virtual pedagogy when we may go back to the physical platform. Therefore, in order to build better future, the stakeholders need to take advantage of both and start implementing the procedures. Once a decision takes place, the rest will follow.

Policies must incorporate psychological and social needs. Communication is the key and policies must look forward to reaching every student to understand their needs. More and more researches therefore must be encouraged.

Rapporteur’s Report
Webinar on COVID-19 Pandemic and Employment Opportunity
22 October 2020
Time: 6.30 PM
Venue: Zoom Platform

A webinar on COVID-19 Pandemic and Employment Opportunity was jointly organized by the Centre for Genocide Studies, University of Dhaka (CGS), Bangladesh, and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES), Bangladesh. The purpose of the webinar was to identify the challenges of employment opportunities during the pandemic period and explore the ideas to mitigate those challenges which can be formulated into policies later on. The key note speaker of the session was Dr. Muhammad Abdul Moyeen, Professor and Dean (Acting) of Faculty of Business Studies, University of Dhaka and Professor Dr. Mustafizur Rahman, Distinguished fellow of Centre for
Policy Dialogue, was the key discussant. The whole session was moderated by Ms. Tina Marie Blohm, Resident Representative, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) Bangladesh and Dr. Imtiaz Ahmed, Professor of International Relations & Director of Centre for Genocide Studies (CGS). The Webinar started with the greetings of Dr. Imtiaz Ahmed followed by Ms. Tina Blohm. After the speech of the key note speakers and discussant, an interactive question and answer session was held. The webinar ended with the closing remarks of Dr. Imtiaz Ahmed.

**Rationale**
Every crisis creates an opportunity. The aim of the webinar was to identify how the pandemic is opening up opportunities in terms of employment. It was also imperative to know and discuss about the progress of Bangladesh. The suggestions coming up in the discussion can be proposed to be formulated into policies.

It is necessary to try to identify where are the gap of knowledge, who are the sufferers of this pandemic and how to provide stimulus packages for them. Steps need to be taken for the students who are going to graduate and also for the recent graduates. It is a matter of discussion about the measures to be taken up by the government and universities in terms of creating career opportunities that are sustainable, safe and tech savvy. Due to pandemic, it is about time to recalibrate the education system and employment opportunities, considering the new challenges of COVID. The employment elasticity of growth is coming down i.e. for every percentage of growth in Bangladesh, less and less employment opportunities are created. COVID has exacerbated this trend. So, it is about time to discuss about the opportunities and challenges of employment during and post-COVID period.

**Challenges**
- In present context, the labor market is changing rapidly and becoming more focused on productivity along with the technological advancement. It is a challenge for Bangladesh adapt to these changes in the new normal situation along with the technological evolution.
- It is quite a daunting task to train the prevailing work force according to the future demands of labor market.
- It is difficult for the present education system of Bangladesh to cope with the present competitive educational development that is evolving gradually.
• The present education system of Bangladesh cannot ensure the production of skilled labor. As such, it is seen that people from foreign countries come to Bangladesh and take up the highly paid skilled jobs.
• There is a lack of dynamism in education system which is a barrier for the growth of economy of Bangladesh.
• It is seen that many of challenges of labor market are not originated in Bangladesh rather they are originated in the global market. Hence, these problems cannot be resolved by Bangladesh alone. The trends of global discipline of e-commerce are mostly imposed on the developing countries like Bangladesh.

**Recommendations**

• In education and learning, there is a need to unlearn and relearn and freeze learning and move the cycle over and over again. At this stage, it is very necessary to continuously enhance new skill sets adapting with the technologies.
• The ongoing employability depends on acquiring continuously changing competencies. It is a must to acquire competency to fit in the new circumstance and new challenges.
• To keep pace with the competitive world, skill enhancing training needs to be introduced in the primary level of education continuing till tertiary level of education. The vocational education system should be given more importance.
• The young generation must be trained in a way that apart from emotional intelligence, they can also practice soft skills, deal with uncertainties etc.
• There is a need for thorough investigation of where the skills are required and where to increase the skills.
• In Bangladesh, most of the labor is focused on domestic economy. So, measures should be taken to take an advantage of this.
• It is the responsibility of state to facilitate the ecosystem between the private and public partnership. Good blending of the public sector infrastructure with the private sector can create opportunities and accelerate the growth of economy.
• In Bangladesh, both informal and formal economic sectors contribute in national economy. The formal sectors can seem to be quite stable but the informal sectors are not always that stable. For the economic growth it is important for both the sectors to go hand in hand. Although it is not possible to make the informal sectors formal but tools can be provided to help them flourish.
• With technological advancement, digital platforms will keep evolving and this will pave the way for the evolve of new type of jobs. So, a technological reform is necessary for Bangladesh in respect to the technological advancements.
• Labor rights have to be ensured. The COVID situation might have given an opportunity to revisit the demands of the labors that was prevailing for many years.
• The Universal health scheme should be upgraded. If it is implemented with the fiscal support from the govt, it will reduce burden from the entrepreneurs.
• Bangladesh should take active participation in global e-commerce sector. It will open the doors of opportunities for Bangladesh.
• It is necessary to take steps for market diversification. Export and market diversification should go in parallel for the economy to sustain in this global pandemic.
• It is very important to come out of the age-old prison of thought, minimizing to be critical of a structure and be hyperactive in solving the problems. This is applicable to both individual level and government level.
Annexure: 2

E-Assembly on Covid-19 Pandemic and Higher Education: Challenges and Beyond
Resource Persons

Chief Guest

1. Professor Dr. Md. Akhtaruzzaman
   The Honorable Vice-Chancellor
   University of Dhaka

Panel Speakers

2. Professor A. S. M. Maksud Kamal
   Pro Vice-chancellor (Academic)
   University of Dhaka

3. Professor Dr. Md. Sazzad Hossain
   Member
   University Grants Commission (UGC) Bangladesh

4. Professor Veena Das
   Department of Anthropology
   Johns Hopkins University, USA

5. Professor Peter Sammonds
   Geophysics, Department of Earth Sciences
   University College London, UK
6. Mr. Gurumurthy Kasinathan  
   Founder and Director IT for Change, India

7. Professor Piers Bursill-Hall  
   Department of Pure Mathematics  
   Centre for Mathematical Sciences Cambridge, UK

8. Professor Sohail Inayatullah  
   Tamkang University  
   Taipei Futures Chair, UNESCO, Australia

9. Professor Liyan Zhang  
   Professor and Director  
   Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship  
   Tianjin University of Finance and Economics

10. Professor Syed Manzoorul Islam  
    Department of English  
    University of Dhaka

11. Professor Imran Rahman  
    Former Vice-Chancellor  
    University of Liberal Arts, Bangladesh

12. Professor Ashok Swain, Ph.D  
    Department of Peace and Conflict Research  
    Uppsala University

13. Professor Syed Munir Khasru  
    Chairman  
    The Institute for Policy, Advocacy, and Governance (IPAG) &  
    Professor, IBA, University of Dhaka
Moderators

14. Dr. Imtiaz Ahmed
   Professor of International Relations and Director
   Centre for Genocide Studies
   University of Dhaka

15. Ms. Tina Marie Blohm
   Resident Representative
   Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Bangladesh
Annexure: 3

Policy Webinar-1 on Covid-19 Pandemic and Digitalizing Higher Education
15 October 2020
Resource Persons

1. Key Note Speaker: Dr. Asif Hossain Khan
   Professor of Department of Computer Science and Engineering
   Faculty of Engineering and Technology
   University of Dhaka and the Discussant

II. Discussant: Mr. Anir Chowdhury
   Policy Advisor, a2i, Innovate for all
   Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh.
Annexure: 4

Policy Webinar-2 on Pandemic and Employment Opportunity
22 October 2020
Resource Persons

1. Key Note Speaker: Dr. Muhammad Abdul Moyeen
   Professor and Dean (Acting) of Faculty of Business Studies
   University of Dhaka

II. Discussant: Professor Dr. Mustafizur Rahman
   Distinguished fellow
   Centre for Policy Dialogue,
Participants

Distinguished individuals from various educational institutions, both home and abroad, participated in the e-Assembly on *Covid-19 Pandemic and Higher Education: Challenges and Beyond*. Participants from national and international universities and reputed institutions like the University of Dhaka, Johns Hopkins University, USA, University College London, UK, IT for Change, India, University of Cambridge, UK, and University Grants Commission (UGC), Bangladesh spoke in four sessions at the two-day e-Assembly. Altogether, 400 people participated in the e-Assembly on the Zoom Virtual Platform. The e-Assembly was live streamed on the CGS official Facebook page. Nearly 8,000 viewers on average spent three hours per day to watch the e-Assembly on Facebook live.
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