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Rezbin Nahar  
Foyasal Khan  
Farheen Hassan

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## **Impact of Covid-19 on Private Higher Educational Institutions (PHEIs) in Bangladesh: Challenges and Policy Responses**

*Dr. Rezbin Nahar\**

*Faculty of Business Administration*

*American International University-Bangladesh*

*Dr. Foyasal Khan*

*International Islamic University Malaysia*

*Farheen Hassan*

*Faculty of Business Administration*

*American International University-Bangladesh*

**Corresponding author\*: Dr. Foyasal Khan**

Email: foyasal.khan@gmail.com

## **Impact of Covid-19 on Private Higher Educational Institutions (PHEIs) in Bangladesh: Challenges and Policy Responses**

### **Abstract**

This paper investigates the likely impact of Covid-19 on private higher educational institutions (PHEIs) in Bangladesh. To conduct the study, a qualitative approach has been employed based on interviewing 8 educationists and 2 students on three key areas: general impact assessment; teaching and learning; and future impact of COVID-19 on PHEIs. The findings revealed that COVID-19 may create a barrier to the successive growth of tertiary education in terms of dropping enrolment in the coming academic years. The study also indicates that PHEIs may face trouble in the salary payment of their academic and non-academic staff. Even, many staff may lose their jobs. Thus, Covid-19 may psychologically affect the community of PHEIs. Based on the findings, this research recommends that the government should offer a financial package to protect PHEIs in order to effectively tackle the challenges of the COVID-19 outbreak. The findings of this study, conducted at the very early stages of coronavirus spread in Bangladesh, will be important for policymakers in further improving the capacity of PHEIs in Bangladesh in facing a crisis. The study also suggests that future research considering more samples and involving all stakeholders need to continue to effectively measure the real impact and severity of COVID-19 on PHEIs.

**Keywords:** Private Higher Educational Institutions (PHEIs), Private University, Financial Crisis, Future Impact of Covid-19, UGC

## **1. Introduction**

The first three known coronavirus cases were reported on 7 March 2020 in Bangladesh and since then, new cases have been growing at an alarming rate. To limit the spread of the novel coronavirus, Bangladesh government imposed a nationwide lockdown on 25 March 2020 and since then, all academic institutions such as schools, colleges and universities have been closed and reopening is still uncertain. The Great Lockdown, as rightly termed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), has already led to unprecedented shocks to the global economy and Bangladesh is no exception from this health-cum-economic crisis. Economic activity has come close to collapse in majority parts of the country, affecting both demand and supply. Like many other sectors, with the spread of COVID-19, the education sector has disrupted in an unprecedented way. This paper will focus on private higher educational institutions (PHEIs) because the adverse impact of COVID-19 on PHEIs is much severe than public education sector. PHEIs is basically financed by tuition fees paid by the students, size of by any kind of donation is negligible. During this pandemic, private universities are unable to collect tuition fees from the current students. Moreover, admission of new students is decreasing at a level that it may not be an economically viable decision to continue semester for many universities. This COVID-19 has exposed that except for some big universities, private universities do not have surplus funds to deal with the challenges of any crisis like this. If universities remain close for uncertain period, most of the universities have to go through the severe financial crisis.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 provide a brief review of the history of the emergence of PHEIs in Bangladesh and their contributions to the national economy of Bangladesh. Section 3 discusses the research methodology. Section 4 analyses the interviews. Section 5 presents the main findings. Section 6 concludes with policy recommendations.

## **2. Literature Review**

Higher education directly cornubites to human capital development and thus, plays a vital role in socioeconomic development of a nation.

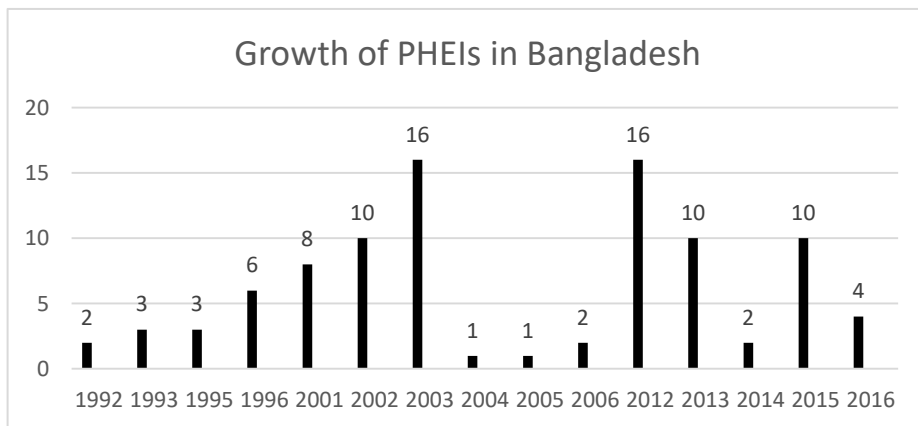
Bangladesh had six public universities in 1971 (Sarkar & Hossain, 2018). Demand for education in general and higher education in particular was on the rise in the independent Bangladesh. Bangladesh pursued an outward and market-oriented policy from the second half of the 1970s. A number of multinationals was attracted by this policy to start their operations in Bangladesh in 1980s. This created demand for market-oriented courses such as BBA, English, computer science and engineering, and ICT. Unfortunately, there was no plan to set up new public universities to meet the newly created demand for higher education. On the other hand, every year, number of students who passed the Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) and equivalent examinations were significantly increasing, and more students were attracted to pursue higher education. Thus, an acute seat crisis was created in public universities and still seat crisis in public universities is a topic of public discourse in Bangladesh. In 2019, out of a total of 13,36,629 HSC examinees, 988,172 students – 503,828 boys and 484,344 girls – passed. Whereas, according to the education ministry, the number of seats at the country's 37 public universities is around 60,000. So, only 6.10 % of the total passed are eligible to get admitted into public universities. Before setting up private universities, this seat crisis led to the out-migrations of students. Alam, Haque and Siddique (2007) shows that on average in a year, about 50-60,000 Bangladeshi students enrol in different colleges, universities and institutes in India. Hence, Bangladesh not only loses a huge amount of foreign exchange every year but also suffers from the brain drains of pupils. In this troubled situation, the option of founding universities under private (non-profit) management and ownership was felt in the 1980s. the government also gradually realized that the public universities in Bangladesh would not be able to meet the increasing demand for higher education. So, the Private University Act of 1992 (PURA) was passed in the National Parliament to set up private universities in Bangladesh. The Act encouraged different non-profit philanthropic organizations and social thinkers to establish fully-fledged private (mainly non-profit) universities and in November 1992, North South University (NSU) emerged as the first private university in Bangladesh. While the government lost the monopoly of providing higher education, this Act was a milestone in the history of higher education in Bangladesh (Monem & Baniamin, 2010). At present there are 151 universities in Bangladesh of which 105 are private and 46 are public universities. Though there are questions about the quality of some private universities, the quality of education at most private universities is good according to University Grants Commission (UGC) monitoring report. For example, a study of Huq and

Huque (2014) claims that some private universities in Bangladesh are maintaining a good standard of quality education by pretty good faculties as well as a good teaching atmosphere. These include North South University (NSU), BRAC University, American International University (AIUB), United International University of Bangladesh (UIU), Daffodil International University (DIU), Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB), ULAB and East West University. The growth of private universities is shown in the Figure 1.

Source: Bangladesh Education Statistics 2018, BANBEIS

**Figure 1: Growth of PHEIs in Bangladesh**

Private universities have played an important role in spreading quality higher education in Bangladesh. In a study on the quality of higher education, Lamanga (2002) claims that like public universities of Bangladesh, over the course of a decade, excellence in education in different disciplines has been achieved through dynamic and effective



academic leadership by few top private universities in Bangladesh. However, she emphasized that higher education should have relevance, flexibility, appropriateness, inclusiveness, and inclusion as the central objective of improving quality in education.

The country's private universities have been established because government alone does not facilitate the demand for higher education in the country, and

private finance has emerged as a remarkable opportunity to build existing higher education resources. But tuition fees in the private universities are substantially higher as compared to those in public universities because private universities are entirely self-financed while public universities are hugely public funded (Wadood, 2006). Despite this limitation, the positive side of private universities are many. Private University Act-1992 does not allow students to be involved in politics. So, the campuses of private universities are free from student politics, as a result, all classes and examinations are held on schedule and students have no session jam unlike public universities (Huq & Huque, 2014). Many graduates from these private universities have been contributing to the different sectors of Bangladesh and upholding the flag of our nation across the world. Another aspect is that handsome salary packages attracted many Bangladeshi expatriates with foreign degrees to return home with the prospect of academic or administrative positions and thus, they contribute enormously in the development of this sector (Wadood, 2006).

Many scholars also believe that the COVID-19 Crisis is creating problems, but it is also creating tremendous opportunities. For example, Lamanga (2020) states that the COVID-19 can bring a paradigm shift in Higher Education Institutions (HEI). Taking social distancing as a temporary new norm, PHEIs can develop more of the pedagogical and administrative tools through using online platform and other ed-tech tools (Lamanga, 2020).

In sum, the COVID-19 has caused likely unequal interruption in students' learning and assessment in all educational institutions. The authorities of PHEIs in Bangladesh are at a loss about the coping strategy as it is very difficult to predict the likely impact of Covid-19 on PHEIs in Bangladesh at this moment. However, despite the limitations, this paper is an early attempt to investigate the impact so that this study can be an important literature in further researching on this topic.

### **3. Research Methodology**

This paper mainly employs qualitative research method to investigate the phenomena of the impact of Covid-19 on PHEIs in Bangladesh. In particular, a phenomenological research methodology, particularly, interpretive phenomenological analysis, as suggested by Smith et al. 2009; Crotty, 1998; Giorgi, 1989 & 1997, has been adopted in this study. The data collection technique and data analysis are discussed below:

### **3.1 Data Collection**

An open-ended questionnaire was developed using Google forms and approached through email using the purposive sampling technique. As cloud-based data management platform, the Google Forms is very useful for data collection as well as for data analysis during the coronavirus pandemic when physical meeting is not suitable. We designed the questionnaire in a manner that requires 30-40 minutes maximum to get a participant's feedback. The questionnaire had two major areas: one is demographic information and the other is related questions to help identify the impact of Covid-19 on PHEIs in Bangladesh. It consists of three parts: part A is for assessing general impact, part B is specific to the impact of Covid-19 on Teaching and Learning in PHEIs in Bangladesh and part-C focuses on the future impact. The participants were assured that all the information will be kept confidential.

Data was collected from mid-March to mid-May 2020. Out of 18 experts, 10 responded, having a response rate of almost 55 %. So, the sample size for this study is 10 which fulfils the minimum no of nonprobability sample size for semi-structured/in-depth interviews which is 5 to 25 (Saunders et al., 2016). Collected samples in this study are mainly academic and administrative staff who are holding higher positions in different Private Universities of Bangladesh and qualified as experts in the higher education sector of Bangladesh. Experts include Vice Chancellors, private university Students, high officials of higher educational institutes, Deans and Head of department from a number of private universities.

In addition to in-depth interview, in-depth and detailed data were collected from other multiple sources of information including direct observation, participant observations, audio-visual material, documents, reports etc. to provide a holistic inquiry to the impact of Covid-19 on PHEIs in Bangladesh. The resulting information created a triangulation or



convergence of sources so that some policy responses can be suggested through the convergence of these three sources of data.

### **3.2 Data Analysis:**

An iterative, spiralling, or a cyclical process that proceeds from more general to more specific observations as suggested by Silverman (2000), Creswell (1998) and Palys (1997) was followed to analyse the data. Every response was carefully read to generate the important themes to understand the phenomenon. To minimize the error in data coding in this study, the researcher does not manually key-in data from the respondent rather uses the Google Forms which have the automated user response record in its spreadsheet to simplify data collection and analysis.

## **4. Analyzing the Interviews**

After discussing on the demographic background of respondents, the section analyses the results in the following five sub-sections; the most-affected areas of PHEIs; expected governments' support to PHEIs in Bangladesh; teaching and learning in PHEIs; the Challenges ahead for PHEIs arising from the COVID-19 pandemic ; and Overcoming the Challenges of the COVID-19 to PHEIs.

### **4.1 Demographic Background of Respondents**

The demographic characteristics in terms of the respondents' gender, age and experiences in education sector are presented in Table-1. The Table shows that 70 % of the respondents are male, and the rest are female. 20 % of the respondents were between 26 and 30 years old, 40 % were between 41 and 50 years old, 30 % were between 61 and 70 years old, and 10 % of the respondents were aged 71-75. 60 % of the respondents have more than 20 years of experiences in education sector, 10 % has 16-20 years, another 10 % has 15-10 years and the rest 20 % has less than 10 years experiences as university student and no experience as staff or management. The samples are much diverse which included vice chancellor, registrar, dean, head of departments, senior professors, associate professors, high official from UGC and students. The results reveal that the respondents are highly experienced in PHEIs sector in Bangladesh and thus qualified as experts to give a

clear picture on the impact of Covid-19 on PHEIs in Bangladesh and to identify the challenges and policy responses in this situation.

**Table 1: Demographic Background of Respondents**

Demographic Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	7	70.00
Female	3	30.00
<i>Total</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>100</i>
<b>Age</b>		
25-30	2	20.00
41-50	4	40.00
61-70	3	30.00
71-75	1	10.00
<i>Total</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>100</i>
<b>Experiences in Education Sector</b>		
Nil or less than 10 years	2	20.00
10-15 years	1	10.00
16-20 years	1	10.00
More than 20 years	6	60.00
<i>Total</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>100</i>

**4.2 The Most-affected Areas of PHEIs**

What are the impacts of Covid-19 on PHEIs in Bangladesh? - was the first general question that was asked because it is not so easy to identify all probable impacts of Covid-19 on PHEIs of Bangladesh without related respondents who are affiliated with the PHEIs of Bangladesh. The findings are presented in points as follows:

**4.2.1 Hampering Normal Academic Activities**

The researchers found that Covid-19 made a far-reaching negative impact on PHEIs in Bangladesh. Most of respondents have emphasised that the Covid-19 has already stopped the on-campus education and an uncertainty has arisen about the reopening of the campus activities. In addition, PHEIs may suffer financial crisis if the Covid-19 prolongs. As a respondent vividly stated:

*“The major impacts of Covid-19 on PHEIs lie in stopping the on-campus education; non-completing courses on time; interrupting the conduction of assessment and exam; hampering mostly the financial solvency of the PHEIs and the admission intake.”*

#### **4.2.2 Adaptation with Technology and Teamwork**

Most of the experts in our research opine that most of the private universities are not fully ready to continue educational activities through online. Especially, conducting online examinations and grading students’ scripts are the major challenges when many of the learners are not well equipped to cope up with the changed channel of education. They said, there is lack of knowledge about preparing questionnaire development for assessing students in the crisis moment. So, they expected, the UGC should clearly assist universities regarding evaluation, whether it can be open Book exam or case study solution. Two responses on this issue are highlighted below:

*“...the faculty members and other employees had to quickly adapt with the online class systems...students were deprived of the teamwork activities due to home quarantined imposed by government.”*

*“... the grades were questionable because there was not a valid method of grading policy.”*

Dissatisfaction may arise due to lower speed of internet. and barrier of creativity due to the teachers and students had to rely on impromptu actions imposed by authorities. A respondent stated:

*“... The network and internet speed being moderately lower resulted dissatisfactory results in online classes. Students productivity out of those online classes were not justified. Moreover, the teachers and students had to rely on impromptu actions imposed by authorities which were a barrier to the creativity.”*

The findings of this research are supported by media reports. To keep academic activities on track, a report by The Business Standard (4 April 2020) shows that about 60 % of the private universities in the country have started holding classes online under the guidance of UGC and Private Universities Association. However, the responses of students to this initiative is mixed. In North South University (NSU), everything is active in online at NSU and about 100% students are taking lessons online (Bonikbarta, 04 April 2020). Conversely, in the case of United International University (UIU), about 80 % of the students are taking part in the online classes, but many students in the rural areas are not able to take part in online classes due to the poor state of internet facilities (Bonikbarta, 04 April, 2020).

#### ***4.2.3 Enrolment and Financial Assistance to the students***

The experts see the immediate impact of Covid-19 on PHEIs is the loss of enrolment of students in coming semester and also new intake. Currently, many students are funded by scholarships in different private university's scholarship program. Many universities may unable to continue such scholarships if a huge amount of funds, usually coming from tuition fees, is lost due to the delayed reopening and closure of the universities. Two responses on this issue are highlighted below:

*“...Semester disruption as well as interruption in new enrolment. As a result, overall academic activities will be seriously affected.”*

*“... this interruption may hamper the education of those students who are getting scholarship or financial aid from universities.”*

Finding of the research is supported by enrollment statistics from the latest annual report of the University Grants Commission (UGC). The number of students in private universities of the country has increased to 6,459 between the year 2017 and 2018 in 90 private universities. The number of students is expected to decrease this year 2020 due to the adverse impact of COVID-19 (Bonikbarta, 31 March 2020). Private universities have started to admit students since June 1 with the approval of UGC. Yet, the universities are not able to fill even half of the seats as of the end of June (Bonikbarta, 28 June 2020).

#### **4.2.4 Funding Extracurricular Activities**

Extracurricular activities are promoted in universities so that students can have the opportunity to apply their academic skills in a real-world context. So, these activities are considered part of a well-rounded education. A comparative picture of extracurricular activities is shown in Table-2:

**Table 2: Extracurricular activities for students in NSU and AIUB**

NSU	AIUB
1. Young Entrepreneurs Society	1. AIUB Oratory Club (AOC)
2. NSU Debating Club	2. AIUB Drama Club (ADC)
3. The International Association of Students in Economics and Management (AIESEC) in North South University	3. AIUB Performing Arts Club
4. NSU Shangskritik Shangathan	4. AIUB Art Club (AAC)
5. Games and Sports Club	5. AIUB Photography Club
6. NSU Cine & Drama Club	6. AIUB Social Welfare Club- Shomoy
7. Young Economists' Forum	7. AIUB Film Club (AFC)
8. MBA Club	8. AIUB Computer Club (ACC)
9. Photography Club	9. AIUB Community of Engineering Students (ACES)
10. Earth Club	10. AIUB Business Club (ABC)
	11. AIUB Cyber Games Club
	12. AIUB Foreign Student Association

11. English Club	(AFSA)
12. NSU Media Club	13. AIUB Cricket Team
13. Social Service Club	14. AIUB Football Team
14. Cyber Café	15. IEEE Student Chapter
	16. AIESEC at AIUB

Source: NSU website (2020) and AIUB website (2020)

Most of the experts in our survey responded that Covid-19 may create a huge financial crisis to the university that may compel universities to cut their budget from extracurricular activities. Thus, students may lose the opportunity to apply their academic skills in a real-world context and grow their leadership skills. In this case, the government should come forward and give the right incentives to the universities so that universities can sustain these extracurricular activities. A vivid remark in this context from one of the respondents is as follows:

*“... extracurricular activities will diminish at a great extent. I believe the overall backbone of education has been slowed down to 10 years.”*

#### **4.2.5 Difficulty in Salary Payment and Job loss of Academic Staff**

A number of experts cautioned that keeping some faculty members may be redundant if enrolment drops sharply. In this case, universities may have to face difficulty in paying the full salaries of faculty and staff. In dire situation, many faculty members and staff may lose their jobs. New hiring of faculty members and other staffs also may be disrupted. A vivid response on this issue is as follows:

*“...Many parents of existing and new students may lose their savings, resulting in deferred admissions and term registrations. Universities will face difficulty in paying the full salaries of faculty and staff.”*

Our findings are supported by the recent media reports. A report by Bonik Barta (April 12, 2020) shows that private universities are cutting teachers' salaries. The report states that through some universities have paid the full salary for the month of March 2020 to their teachers and some of them have

paid teachers ahead of time, most private universities have paid partial salaries to teachers. Again, some universities have not paid any money to the teachers.

### **4.3 Expected Governments' Support to PHEIs in Bangladesh**

The respondents think that our education system needs overhauling so that our students can truly contribute to the right manner in facing the crises. To them, the academic or economic loss can be reversed in due course, but loss of a life cannot be reversed. So, saving lives should be top priority. When crisis is over, we must prioritize education with quality rather than quantity. So that students can recover the worst effects of those pandemic. Some expected supports that respondents demanded are discussed in points.

#### ***4.3.1 Subsidizing the Tuition Fees of Deserving Students***

Most of the respondents highlighted that many students from moderate family background may be affected so harshly that they will not be able to pay tuition fees and at the same time, if these tuition fees are subsidized from other sources, then universities might have financial crisis at a stage that they might not able to pay salaries to their staffs. So, Government or Ministry or UGC should provide subsidies of fees for the students of private universities who are really in need. In this context, three responses are given below:

*“...Government should subsidize fees for the students of private universities and take some advanced policies to empower students.”*

*“...Government should give the financial support to the PHEIs to overcome the unexpected crisis.”*

*“... provide loan at zero interest rate to those students of the PHEIs whose parents are in financial crisis.”*

#### ***4.3.2 Making a Database of Students for their welfare***

Another respondent raised an important point that is to make a database of students of PHEIs so that UGC can get a clear picture what is really needed to do for the welfare of the students. In the words of the respondent:

*“... I believe UGC should have a database and should have discussed response from the students to get possible feedback on the so far imposed policies on Private Universities. But the declaration to turn off the universities physically was a challenge that UGC did at its best!”*

#### ***4.3.3 Supporting Internet Facilities to Continue Online Academic Activities***

Around 60 % of the country's private universities have begun to offer online classes to keep academic activities on track, as the Business Standard reported on April 4, 2020. These universities have adopted a tech-based approach to classes online via platforms such as Google Meet, Zoom or Discord. However, according to the views of experts, online learning is not a pleasure experience. In urban areas, internet connection is to some extent available, but network quality is not up to the mark of taking online classes. the situation is even worse in rural areas where students are not able to connect with classes in real time because of frequent breakdown of electricity. In addition, wi-fi facilities are very rare in rural areas and students have to depend on private phone companies' internet packages which are relatively costly than wi-fi. So, attending online classes for rural students are becoming costlier than urban students. Therefore, few suggestions are below:

*“...Encourage and support online education and leave it to each university to manage this. UGC should provide heavily subsidised broadband connectivity to all private universities and talk to and if needed subsidise Telco's for providing affordable 4G to students.”*

A survey report by BBS and UNICEF Bangladesh shows that 37.6 % of the country's households had some internet connectivity through any app, and only 5.6 % had a computer or tablet (BBS and UNICEF Bangladesh, 2019). This report supports our findings that most universities and colleges are still



not equipped with both the hardware and connectivity needed to provide online lessons.

#### **4.4 Teaching and Learning in PHEIs: During and Post-Covid-19 pandemic**

Covid-19 pandemic has brought positive and negative changes in teaching and learning of PHEIs in Bangladesh as observed from the respondent's responses which are discussed in separate sections in the following:

##### ***4.4.1. Positive Affects to Teaching and Learning***

COVID-19 inspired PHEIs in Bangladesh to choose online as well as distance learning method in place of on campus teaching learning system. Many universities have offered online classes which have been well-accepted by the students who reside in urban areas with easy access to internet connection. This has partially boosted a confidence to the universities that they are able to offer online classes in time of crisis. Universities have learnt what are the available tools required to arrange online classes. Two responses are as follows:

*“...introduction of online classes and acceptance by the students is a positive side. They are now a bit confident about online classes and with the tools required to use them.”*

*“...it [nationwide lock down] has forced the top ranked private universities to adapt with online classes which is going to be future educational trend for the private universities of Bangladesh. The perception of students has also improved towards the system”*

However, a respondent demanded that we need to emphasis on a proper Learning Management System in terms of handing Facebook, Zoom, etc. for the purpose of effective teaching and learning. In the word of a respondent:

*“...There has been a huge learning during the crisis. Beside handling the class delivery part by Facebook, Zoom, etc., we have to go a long way to develop a proper Learning Management System in terms of assessing students through these online platforms”*

#### **4.4.2. Negative Affects to Teaching and Learning**

The respondents find out a number of negative affects coming from online-based teaching and learning. Firstly, students may not have equal access to internet facilities as well as gadgets that require to attend in online classes. Microsoft teams and other software demand constant internet connection which is very difficult to ensure for the students who are residing now in rural areas due to the pandemic. Secondly, all universities are not in the same position of technological adaptability in terms of offering online classes. Thirdly, it would be time consuming for both teachers and students if the latter is assessed through assignment only. Three statements from the respondents are as follows:

*“...it had also created an adverse effect in grading policy and grades for the students. The teachers had to prepare multiple times to face the challenges and the students had to depend more on assignments which costed more time.”*

*“...the universities in rural areas were not that technologically sound in adapting the online classes! This COVID-19 disruption may increase imbalance between the rural and urban higher educational institutions.”*

*“...It disrupted the interactive and face to face learning system, it hampers the ongoing examinations and assessment method, totally stopped the practical and Lab classes.”*

One respondent said that covid-19 has seriously affected ongoing the private university trimester system education. The respondent recommends universities to follow dual semester system so that

universities may get some time to adjust with any unwanted shocks. In the words of a respondent:

*“... If these universities would have 4.5 months +4.5 months + 3 months’ system, there would be some time for adaptation and adjustment.”*

#### **4.5 The Challenges ahead for PHEIs arising from the COVID-19 pandemic**

The respondents pointed out enormous challenges that PHEIs is likely to face during and post-pandemic time including regular schedule management, stress management, exam policy, team work skills, enrolment and financial deprivation, threat to progressive educational growth, and development of the sanitation system. Due to the closure of the campus, workshops, seminars, conferences, sports, cultural activities etc. were postponed, which also impeded interaction with industry-academic collaboration and also had a negative impact on the short and long-term development of students' skills. Some of the salient challenges are featured below:

##### ***4.5.1 Regular Schedule Management***

The government's impromptu intervention has created a major challenge for university authorities particularly to maintain regular schedules. The challenges as highlighted by the respondents are as follows:

*“...Maintaining regular schedules.”*

*“...sudden change in online class, diagnostic facility for students (if needed).”*

*“...smooth running of the academic sessions.”*

##### ***4.5.2 Stress management***

This pandemic situation has created stress for both the students and faculty members. On the other hand, students are uncertain about their on-time

graduation and faculty members are worried about their salaries. Many private universities are unable to pay full salaries and faculty members are also afraid to lose their jobs because students cannot pay their dues. The challenges most of the respondents stressed are as follows:

*“...The teachers and students had to undergo lots of stress.”*

*“...Both administrative and managerial. Many will suffer financially because enrolment will be drastically reduced.”*

*“Providing salaries to the academics administrative and other staff.”*

#### **4.5.3 Exam Policy**

The respondents are sceptical about examination policy during Covid-19. As highlighted by the respondents:

*“...The exam policy was questionable, and the grading system were adversely affected.”*

*“...Taking online classes and exams of those students who are not able to afford it.”*

#### **4.5.4 Teamwork Skills**

One of goals of universities is to inculcate teamwork skills among the graduates so that they are ready for the future world of work. To develop the ability to work efficiently with others, private universities offer a variety of group works within the courses that require a lot of interactions among the students. As Covid-19 pandemic compels universities to offer courses through online, students may lose their teamwork capacity. A respondent stated:

*“...the teamwork skills have been missing at a great extent.”*

#### **4.5.5 Enrolment and financial hardship**

Due to Covid-19, many guardians are in financial difficulty. the flow of income for everyone has contracted because of locked down condition. Therefore, a section of guardians is rethinking about educational investment of their children. Respondents cautioned that if guardians do not invest

money in educating their children, PHEIs may face enrolment and financial distress issues in the coming semesters. Two statements are as follows:

*“...Many will suffer financially because enrolment will be drastically reduced.”*

*“...Most of the PHEIs of Bangladesh are facing financial hardship to run their unavoidable cost such as salary, utility bill etc.”*

#### **4.5.6 Threat to progressive educational improvement**

In the coming months, higher education institutions are expected to do more and at the same time fighting on several fronts. This includes addressing the more immediate challenges posed by the COVID-19 threat, seeking improved online delivery mechanisms and planning to address the pandemic's long-term impacts on institutional capacity.

*“...The after-pandemic adjustment was a constant threat for the progressive educational improvement and growth of the students.”*

#### **4.5.7 Developing Sanitation System**

Respondents highlight that PHEIs need to invest heavily on developing a proper sanitization system to bring back a conducive environment in campus-based learning.

*“...sudden change in online class, diagnostic facility for students (if needed), Upgrade sanitation and disinfection system.”*

### **4.6 Overcoming the Challenges of the COVID-19 to PHEIs**

In order to overcome of the COVID-19 challenges, PHEIs in Bangladesh should take various short, medium, and long-term measures. In the short term, they must interact with students, educators, and staff via electronic and virtual sources to prevent panic and obey the Covid-19 health guidelines. And they should also be encouraging academics and students for continuation of online teaching and learning. A respondent stated:

*“...They should continue online teaching and learning facilities.”*

Many students of PHEIs are living in remote areas and internet access is easy for them. PHEIs need to focus on providing equal facilities for these students. A respondent remarked:

*“...They should provide facilities to those students who are facing obstacle in getting access to online platform.”*

Currently students, faculty members and staff are not fully conversant to the online learning especially how to assess and examine students through online. Moreover, online-based admission and payment system need to develop. For this, students as well as faculty members and staff have to be trained so that education system can be functional during pandemic or any other time of crisis.

*“...They should provide online training regarding taking and attending online exam.”*

*“...Be prepared the faculty, students and the stake holders for online assessment, online Examinations, online admission and payment the tuition fee through online.”*

In the medium term, PHEIs need to raise funds from government and capable business sectors, to develop blended learning, to develop IT Infrastructure for preparing students for the 21st century world of work, to conduct research so that the academics and staff do not need to be retrenched due to the financial crisis occurred by the disruption of Covid-19.

*“...They should collect fund from Govt. or capable business sector or from abroad to continue their teaching and learning facilities.”*

*“...Continue with development blended learning, hopefully with full support of UGC.”*

*“...Conduct research on areas which can help future policy making or providing cheaper but effective alternative to the equipment's' needed to manage such pandemics.”*

In the long-term, PHEIs needs to develop a reserve fund, to organize some online classes for each subject, to educate people on public health issues, to fund advanced research to cope up with the crisis. Some important remarks of the respondents are as follows:

*“...The PHEIs should develop and maintain reserve fund on mandatory basis to bear the expense for crisis period.”*

*“...There should be some online classes for each subject at each semester so that the teachers and students become accustomed regarding it, these will help in reducing traffic jam, environmental pollution etc.”*

*“...Educate people on public health issues, develop awareness, optional public health courses, microbiology, sanitation, and so on.”*

*“...Make public awareness of COVID-related actions and open research cells on pandemic-related impacts and pre-cautions for future (including change in the living styles).”*

*“This PHEIs must not be worried about session congestion rather should focus on the safety and security of the students.”*

## **5. The key findings of the study**

The major findings of this research are as follows:

- The PHEIs may face trouble in the salary payment of their academic and non-academic staffs as many PHEIs are unable to collect students' tuition fees which is main earning source of PHEIs due to the closure of on-campus academic activities.
- Faculty members and other administrative and non-administrative staff may lose their jobs as many of the higher-educational private institutions may face difficulty in surviving.

- There is the probability of dropping out at countable pace for the students because many parents of the students of PHEIs may lose income, jobs, business ventures in the short, medium and long term due to locked down and disruption of economic activities.
- Covid-19 may psychologically affect the community of PHEIs. Current students may be disappointed to study at home and may be demotivated. On the other hand, the recent graduates of PHEIs may fall into a shocking situation of unemployment for uncertain period. many teachers are facing difficulty in maintaining their living standard because they are not receiving salary or receiving partial salary since the COVID-19 outbreak, this it is becoming very difficult for them to stay motivated to provide adequate online teaching. Even the depression of faculty members may affect their teaching and research activities seriously.
- PHEIs can maintain a quality education through online classes and taking exam as par the guideline of UGC.
- Discrimination may exist between the students who are willing to use the online educational platform and the students who are unable to use the online educational platform.
- Covid-19 disruption has brought immense learning opportunities. Having classes on online, faculty members have become more cautious about maintaining quality education following the procedure of pedagogy learning and students are learning to adopt new skills within short period of time and preparing themselves for the crisis moment.

## **6. Conclusion and Recommendations**

The Vision 2021 sets “Digital Bangladesh” as one of the nation's dreams. This vision facilitated nationwide infrastructure in Information & Technology (IT) based communication system. Private universities in Bangladesh responded to this process of digitalization at very early stage



and during the pandemic, it has been proved that PHEIs are capable of offering online courses and provide academic activities through virtual platforms. PHEIs are also facilitating student admission through using online platform. From the opinions of the experts, it is found that participation of students in the online classwork made them mentally strong. However, there are many caveats of providing education through online. It is very important to mention that Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the conspicuous rural-urban disparity in terms of offering higher education through online platform. Rural-based higher education institutions in Bangladesh are lagging behind in terms of internet connectivity, upgrading, and sustaining quality education from the urban-based institutions. Therefore, this research suggests that online-based educational activities should not take as the alternative to the campus-based learning. It is observed that Covid-19 pandemic has severely interrupted normal academic activities in many ways *inter alia* the collaborative and face-to-face learning and teaching program, hindered ongoing tests and evaluation process, stopped the practical and laboratory classes entirely, stopped fine arts lessons, music and other subjects. The recommendations are as follows:

1. Government should direct Ministry of Education and UGC to encourage researchers from both public and private universities to pursue research on the pandemic and to this end, a financial package needs to be announced.
2. Many private university students who are funded by different private university's scholarship program, universities should continue their scholarships. Private university association should cooperate with universities to this matter.
3. Unlike public universities, private universities run on their student's tuition fees. So, faculty members and staff may likely to lose their jobs if university losses revenues drastically. So, government should provide monetary support in the form of loan at low or zero interest rate or grant to recover this sector.
4. The government should include tuition subsidies for private university students who might be in need.

5. PHEIs should work together on developing their curriculum with UGC 's due approval and adopt a common appropriate education system to fight this worldwide pandemic.
6. PHEIs should work to enhance the educational network to reduce educational disparity in both rural and urban areas.

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### **Limitation**

While the information and advice contained in this article are up to date as of 20 May 2020, this is a constantly evolving area which requires regular updates. Therefore, it is important that academicians who are interested to pursue research in this area should keep them up to date with the latest policies and guidelines of Private Universities, Ministry of Education and UGC.

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## **APPENDIX A**

<b>Respondents</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Experience in years</b>
R1	Male	25-30	Student	Nil
R2	Female	25-30	Student	Nil
R3	Male	46-50	Head, Dept. of Business	>20
R4	Female	46-50	Professor	>20
R5	Male	61-65	VC	>20
R6	Male	71-75	Retired Professor	> 20
R7	Male	41-45	Head of Department	16-20
R8	Male	66-70	Professor Emeritus	>20
R9	Male	66-70	Educationist	>20
R10	Female	41-45	Associate Professor	10-15

### **PROFILE OF THE INTERVIEWEES**