

Policy Responses To Covid-19 Pandemic In Higher Education Governance Of Bangladesh

Taslima Khanam

Assistant Professor Department of Law International Islamic University Chittagong Chittagong-4318, Bangladesh.
Law4humanity@gmail.com ORCID: 0000-0001-6794-6632

Abstract

This paper studies policy responses of Bangladesh in university governance during rapid dissemination of the covid-19 pandemic. The aim is to find legal issues of emergency management in higher education to map the responses among government, universities and students and thus to ascertain the policy implications of these responses for university governance in new normal. This paper studied on data points from the public announcements of government and institutions, and identified the higher education (HE) policy priorities under the framework of real time policy evaluation using qualitative approach of content analysis, to consider the comprehended impact of policies. Findings reveals the policy priorities on health of different stakeholders, technical support for online learning from HE governance, and variance of responses for adaptability in higher education. Additionally, the study found the enormous anxiety and uncertainty in university admission and inequality in higher education sector during the pandemic. As the integrity of HE is crucial for sustainable development, hence the ad hoc policy making under the crisis needs a harmonization. Besides the paper focuses on the emergence of a legal framework to deal the crisis as an opportunity to digitalize the HE sector through blended learning method after the covid-19 era.

Keywords: Policy coherence, Pandemic, Online learning, Higher Education.

1. Introduction

A ‘Public Health Emergency of International Concern’ was declared on 30th January, 2020 for the outbreak of novel coronavirus (COVID-19) cases which followed by a pandemic on 11th March, 2020. It impacts almost every segment of the global society. Education sector as a central of societal development, is massively affected by the epidemic, where Bangladesh is not an exception. On 16 March, government ordered to close all educational institutions including all types of campus residence halls and dorms, and later on had gone with extension of several times with the inclusion of online learning as an alternative. Lack of infrastructure for online classes did not permit most of the higher

education institutions to start online classes almost before the first week of July, with few exceptions of privately funded universities. Thus closing universities and cancelling classes became a COVID-19 reality in Bangladesh accompanied with enormous anxiety and uncertainty. At the same time, the COVID-19 crisis had revealed the severe inequality and inequity in higher education worldwide.

This paper examines legal perspective of our HE governance discourses during the COVID-19 crisis throughout the years. Data from public announcements and policy discussions are analyzed by qualitative approach based on individual observation and secondary data analysis. The study aims to reveal areas of

policymaking privileged during the crisis to assess the comprehended impact of policies and find out the policy coherence. This study extends the recent literature surrounding HE reform to the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Background of the Study

At the early stages of pandemic, it was perceived as a matter of public health, however, characteristics of fast contamination make COVID-19 a more critical issue (Burgess & Sievertsen, 2020). Political authorities initiated precautions by travel bans and social distancing measures followed with a curfew in some countries to slow down the rate of COVID-19 infection (OECD, 2020). In these circumstances, most countries closed their educational institutions and education was provided through distance education platforms which was a dilemma for all educational authorities as even though distance learning and other digital way out are the best way to deal with COVID-19, these ways and means also carry the risk of growing educational inequity. Due to the fact that students do not have same level of digital competencies, computers and internet networks, policymakers need to contemplate these differences between student groups.

The sudden shutdown of educational institutions has impacted 94 percent of the world's student population, up to 99 percent in low and lower-middle-income countries (UN, 2020). External and internal environmental pressures shake the HE system. COVID-19 affects all over the education system, examinations, and evaluation, starting of new semester or term adversely. This paper examines HE governance discourse during the COVID-19 crisis through a critical lens. Pandemic preparedness is an extremely complex phenomenon (World Health Organization 2009), and governments are required to operate in a dynamic environment with a multitude of actors involved. Secondary data are used in a naturalistic and interpretative approach to

examine policymaking impacts, focusing on the temporality of responses to provide a picture of HE's governance crisis "within time-ness" aspect of temporality (Ricoeur, 1980, p. 170). In our qualitative analysis, policy coherence among and between decisions and policies were studied.

2.1. Policy coherence

Defining the concept policy coherence is not a simple task as it is varied from different facet. For instance, Challis et al. (1988) generally define policy coordination as the "pursuit of coherence, consistency and comprehensiveness of harmonious compatible outcomes". According to Nilsson, "public policy coherence should be viewed as an attribute of policy that systemically reduces conflicts and promotes collaborations between and within different policy areas to achieve outcomes associated with jointly agreed policy objectives" (Nilsson et al. 2012, 396). Thus, policy coherence can be understood as the degree of collaboration between different policy areas, with the aim of achieving common outcomes. Then again, Savard suggests that policy coherence be defined as "the integration of ideas from different actors, which generate a synergy between elements of public policies associated with the same domain and thus providing a common understanding of the expected effects of these policies" (cited in Savard, Villeneuve, and Caron 2013, 152). To determine policy coherence the "concepts of coordination and harmonization" are the key factors. Policy coherence can thus be seen as a mechanism for better collaboration and coordination between levels of government within the same policy area. As well, on the pandemic perspective, Quigley (2013, 149) states "the need for partnerships when it comes to policy making". Moreover, Katz et al. (2018) suggest that, "in order to improve pandemic preparedness, partnerships need to extend beyond the public and para-public sector, thus including the private sector".

2.2. Policy and education

Natural perils and most man-made hazards do not depend on political boundaries, yet policy must be generated in order to ease disasters effectively, to manage rescue and response maneuvers, or to arrange and provide relief, etc. This policy is typically administered within politically defined boundaries. Hence, many governments continually re-evaluate and strengthen policies in response to the pandemic's critical nature and rapid blowout. "As to any tough response and unprecedented crisis, the implementation and evaluation methods of the policies varied, actions implemented during this COVID-19 pandemic are also not an outcome of usual policies" (Hecl, 1972; Hanberger, 2001). This study defines policies regarding to proposals of solutions seeming problems. According to Heywood, "policies are instruments of governance within which social relations are determined and subjects are formed as they produce knowledge. Knowledge refers to an understanding of the situation and possible solutions produced that fortify the norms and legitimize discourses, which, in turn, become a social construct to legitimate social structures" (Heywood, 1994, p. 101). Besides, "educational policy is an interactive and continuous process, both shaped by and shaping those affected" (Bell and Stevenson, 2006, p. 2). During this pandemic, educational policy took so many forms including official notices, announcements, conference briefings and news articles. In normal times, educational policy is intimately connected to economic growth, social structure and political legitimacy. In times of crisis, educational policy highlights education's key role within societal stability. Study found that, "three dimensions need to be taken into consideration when implementing a new educational policy. First is the possible use of new or revised materials (i.e. curriculum materials), second is the possible use of new teaching approaches (i.e. teaching practices), and third is the possible alteration of

beliefs (or understandings about the curriculum and learning practices)" (Fullan 2007: 30). All three aspects are necessary for change. However, "while educational change is technically simple, it is socially complex" (Fullan 2007: 84). Yet their unpredictable feature (Gellin and Qadri 2016) makes it very challenging for policymakers to sufficiently plan and prepare for what most consider to be the unavoidable happening of future pandemics (Fan, Jamison, and Summers 2018).

A question arises as to which higher education policy stakeholder groups should lead on the response to an emergency. Araz et al., (2011) suggest that it is the duty largely not of government policymakers but university administrators to make critical decisions during a pandemic, "including cancellation of classes, closure of research facilities and communication with university populations". However, McCullar, (2011) identifies the importance: "for higher education institutions to build positive relationships with governmental agencies before a crisis occurs so that communication and operations will run more smoothly". Similarly, Ramaley, (2014) believes: "the management of this kind of problem requires collaboration, a sharing of exposure to risk and an opportunity for benefit, and a willingness to learn as the problem changes".

While an extensive amount of research exists on pandemic preparedness planning (Fineberg 2014; Jennings et al. 2008; Oshitani, Kamigaki, and Suzuki 2008), very little study has been done on the observance of said plans to ascertain the level to which government's actions throughout a pandemic link to the steps outlined in their relevant pandemic preparedness plan and how it is effectually translated into public policies.

2.3. Covid-19 & Higher Education in Bangladesh

On 26 March 2020, Bangladesh declared a countrywide lockdown in the name of “general holiday” shutting down all educational institutions including schools, colleges, and universities, among others. After that, this lockdown was lifted on more than a few months to year. The raise of lockdown is being criticized in circumstances while social distancing couldn't be ensured in an overpopulated country like Bangladesh. However, for the education institutions, the lockdown remained the same until October 2021, creating the realization that unlike other major sectors that need to open gradually, the educational institutions can wait. Amidst these calculations, the country selected for online learning, with some reservation. To ensure an uninterrupted education system among the students, the Ministry of Education supported the teachers and students in continuing online classes and the free flow of knowledge. The concerned authority had begun telecasting distant learning shows for schools, colleges, and universities. Online learning had been mostly focused on the greatest level of education in our country. There are more than 46 public and 105 private universities in Bangladesh that are offering higher education for their students. Moreover, almost 1500 colleges affiliated with Bangladesh's national university are also offering a vast range of classes and programs in higher education (University Grants Commission [UGC], 2021). Public and private universities are based on different economic models in Bangladesh. Private universities are self-sponsored, while the public universities are sponsored by the government.

The public universities performed their duty by shuttering the residential halls on March 24, 2020. The students were forced to leave campus—a move that scattered them to all parts of the country. There was generally no guidance or words of commiseration about how the students might continue with the academic and personal situation in the crisis. If they might be in

communication with their institutions and teachers; and whether in their respective communities, individually or collectively, they could be engaged in community support work during the crisis.

The 46 public universities, with an enrolment of some 600,000 students, had not offered online or other forms of distance education, with the sole exception of Shahjalal University of Science and Technology (SUST) in Sylhet (A Manzoor 2020). The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics' Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2019 found 37.6 percent of households in the country had some access to the internet by any device and only 5.6 percent had a computer or tablet. Half of the homes had a TV. Most universities and colleges were also not equipped with the hardware and connectivity to offer lessons online. Only about a 12 out of a total of around 90 functioning private universities had made an effort to offer online instructions during the forced closure. These few had taken a tech-based approach to conduct online classes through platforms like Google Meet, Zoom or Discord. Many students, however, were not exactly thrilled about their online experience. Lack of a stable internet connection was a frequent problem. Students found it difficult to follow the lessons because the network breaks down and power goes out, more often in the rural areas (A Manzoor 2020).

3. Analysis and Findings

The official database of COVID-related policy news on the Ministry of Education (MOE) website was used to determine policy themes. From the database contained policies from various sources, including newspapers, policies and actions taken by the University Grant Commission (UGC) and MOE or in coordination with other ministries and policy articles directly related to HE, following analysis and findings are assembled.

3.1. Policy responses to the epidemic

Based on the number of policy documents and diversity of sources, the topics of technical, financial and health support, examinations, evaluation, and admission to new semesters or terms were prioritized.

For example, The Daily Star, the premier English newspaper in Bangladesh, organized a webinar on July 11, 2020, to discuss the barriers to transition from the pandemic crisis, and reported that the University Grants Commission (UGC), the coordination authority for universities in Bangladesh is upset that some private universities, with the cessation of classes, decided to assess their students' semester performance based on mid-term exams and classwork without a final exam at the very early. The UGC also rejected some of the universities' plan to admit students for the next term based on their HSC and SSC results (Shamsuzzaman 2020). It seems some formalities and rules are necessary, irrespective of the circumstances.

In a gazette notification of UGC on 10th April, 2020, the private university division of UGC declared the universities must postpone the examinations and admission processes. However, subsequently further declaration published on 7th May, 2020, regarding online classes, examinations, assessments and admission for private universities who already started virtual learning. Here, two alternative policy proposals were made. Universities were asked to established online platform according to their own feasibility. The practical and laboratory courses and all exams were required to be held on campus after settle down the Covid situation. Alternatively it was also proposed that through a continuous assessment based on previous performance, the upcoming examinations and assessments could be done by assignments, case study and viva voce through virtual platform, provided that the online attendance of the students must be of minimum 60% (UGC, 2021). Initially, the University Grants Commission

(UGC) was dissatisfied that some private universities, with the closure of classes, decided to evaluate their students' semester performance based on mid-term exams and classwork without a final exam. The UGC also disallowed some of the universities' plan to go with the admission of new students based on their HSC and SSC results. It is not on the whole appropriate for UGC to be sanctimonious about the issues, which are in any case within the obligation of the respective universities under law. Thus the meaning, implementation conditions, implementation process, and effects of the policy remain unclear. Here, an absence of policy coherence is revealed.

However, against the backdrop of the COVID-19 outbreak, an emergency policy initiative to switch teaching activities into large-scale online teaching was propelled by the government to continue teaching activities across the country while educational institutions were closed. To guarantee the provision of network service resources, The Ministry of Education, together with several telecom operators committed to the maintenance of public service platforms and networks at different levels (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of Bangladesh 2019). This approach enabled networks for online learning, and guaranteed teachers', students', and parents' access to digital educational resources and online learning. Secondly, the government worked on making educational resources accessible to the general public. Relevant statements in policy documents include "virtual teaching resources for free", "develop online teaching quality standards", and "provide technical service support". Besides, 41,501 students of the government universities have been given loan to by smart phone to continue their activities using digital methods during pandemic situation (UGC, 2021).

However, there was ambiguity and disagreement about what to teach, how to teach, the workload of teachers and students, the teaching

environment, and the implications for education equity. Thus the management was in lack of corroboration. Possible difficulties that the policy faced include: the weakness of the online teaching infrastructure, the inexperience of teachers (including unequal learning outcomes caused by teachers' varied experience), the information gap, the complex environment at home, and so forth. However, details about how the policy may be implemented and what effects it may cause are under fierce debate. For example, there are debates about whether online education can adequately replace the traditional offline education, whether the "epidemic" should be one of the educational topics, whether teachers and students may experience work overload, whether the home is a desirable learning environment, and to what extent students and teachers have access to the Internet. To tackle the problems, it is found that the government needs to further promote the construction of the educational information superhighway, bring together teachers and students with standardized home-based teaching/learning equipment, conduct online teacher training, include the development of massive online learning in the national strategic plan, and support academic research into online learning, especially education to help students with online learning difficulties in future. The gains and losses in the implementation process of the policy are worthy of careful consideration and study (Zhang et al., 2020).

However, the vaccination project in educational institutions including all the universities is a great achievement of the implementation of policy with huge policy responses. The universities were required to properly follow the health safety guidelines issued by the World Health Organization (WHO) which got the priority in policy implementation during pandemic situation. Mandatory wearing of face mask, maintaining physical distance, ensuring supply of sanitizer on the campus were prioritized.

Responsibility to arrange for the treatment of any student, teacher and staff member infected with the coronavirus due to practical classes and exams were declared to the respective universities by UGC.

3.2. Difficulties in Policy Implementation

Despite the planning and arrangements by the government, the universities and higher education concerned authorities, the implementation of the policy faced several difficulties.

- Online teaching was constrained by infrastructure. Due to the large-scale teaching needs and private visits, online teaching platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet etc. were often overwhelmed, and network crashes happened frequently. Meanwhile, differences in information technology infrastructure between public and private universities were significant. The network coverage in remote areas is still insufficient, which leads to educational inequity.
- The ratio and proficiency of the use of online teaching resources are still rather low-slung. Most of the teachers had little use and knowledge of online resources before the outbreak, but had to impulsively copy offline lessons to the network space, without making appropriate adaptations.
- Students and teachers faced problems when studying and teaching at home. First of all, there are a wide range of distractions from teaching and studying at home. For example, the burden of housework and childcare found heavy for young teachers, which had a negative impact on their online teaching. Secondly, not all teachers and students were able to find suitable spaces for

teaching and studying at home. Third, teaching and studying constrained by insufficient hardware and an unstable network at home.

- What teaching mode and pedagogy may best work for online learning remains unclear. Although “suspension of physical classes and go for distance learning” aims to avoid impulsive copying of the offline curriculum to online teaching, there is yet to be a consensus that can be widely employed by teachers and students on how such copying may be avoided. Additionally, how to take into account and integrate the unique attributes of online learning into daily online teaching and learning still needs further exploration. At this stage, the task of solving the problems is, to a large extent, on teachers’ shoulders, with little external guidance. Although a gazette notification from UGC Bangladesh dated on 7th May, 2020, directed the assessment policy based on virtual presentation, assignment, case study, online viva etc. approved by the academic council of the concerned universities (UGC, 2021).

Besides, there is also a lack of discipline and ritual in online learning. Further, long-time online teaching impacts negatively on students’ mental and physical health. On a whole, some of the gaps to online learning such as in short supply of physical and intellectual infrastructures, students’ inability to afford devices for online classes, poor technology adeptness and Internet connectivity, students’ anxieties, the digital split between well-off and not-so-well-off students, and the absence of hands-on training are the identified difficulties.

3.3. Master Plan for Information and Communication Technologies in Education

Leveraging Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) to achieve this transformation by enhancing the quality of education and by making learning more relevant and more accessible through technology, the Ministry of Education formulated the Master Plan for ICT in Education in Bangladesh (2012-2021) in 2012 with support from UNESCO and the Master Plan is aligned with and contributes to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals. It includes establishing digital library in each institution of higher education, ICT-based distance learning, etc. Some progresses have been achieved at the Bangladesh Open University and for a few others. Initiatives to ensure the online subscription of foreign journals of international standard have been taken by UGC and have strengthened the research work between universities. Despite limited funding and scope for research, several universities have taken initiatives to establish collaborative arrangements in the area of research of the universities at national and international levels (Ministry of Education-Government of People’s Republic of Bangladesh, 2019). In spite of limitations, this ongoing program has contributed a lot to our higher education during the epidemic. Recent policy discusses the use of 'blended learning' where the use of traditional lectures and tutorials is supplemented, and often replaced to some extent, by new approaches to learning such as computer and on-line models, and other interactive on-line packages designed to cover more basic aspects of the curriculum or to provide remedial support in the students' own time.

4. Conclusion

Education has become an urgent issue, and along with it, educational technologies have been placed as the eventual priority. Among public-policy debates, crises have been theorized as opportunities for change. Kingdon (1984) elaborated on the crisis-opportunity paradox,

arguing that windows of opportunity for institutional change are predicated on “focusing events”. Likewise, this national crisis with global pandemic has created an opportunity to advance the ongoing model of HE governance. In Bangladesh, the government is yet to come up with a concrete plan on how to address the issue of education and skill development during the pandemic and beyond. As O’Connor et al., 2011, reviews some of the reasons for the introduction of blended learning and addresses the potential benefits, hence some of the potential issues need to be considered when using innovative teaching strategies in a blended learning setting. Such as, government should promote and assess the educational information web, and test its functions whether it can meet the demand for online teaching in times of emergency. Besides, when necessary, legal regulations need to be issued to prioritize the educational use of high-quality broadband (Zhang et al., 2020). It is claimed that new approaches to teaching such as student centred and blended learning offer substantial possibilities to enrich the student experience, but only if appropriate responsiveness is found to assimilating the 'new' and 'old' aspects of the teaching program, as well as to the development of applicable administrative arrangements and support. Our government could take the steps in funding to HEIs to lead on the creation of new ‘international partnership models’ (El Masri & Sabzalieva, 2020) that enable our students to get education away from the traditional campus base and government should take the initiatives to leverage technology to build research communities within virtual spaces.

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