

## From control to collaboration: APUB chief calls for overhaul of private university regulations

APUB, under Sabur Khan's leadership, is focusing on proactive policy reforms and a more student-centred higher education system



File image of Sabur Khan, chairman of the Association of Private Universities of Bangladesh (APUB). Photo: Courtesy

**Mamun Abdullah**

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Sabur Khan, chairman of the Association of Private Universities of Bangladesh (APUB), offers deep insights into the evolving landscape of private higher education in an exclusive interview with Dhaka Tribune's Mamun Abdullah. He discusses regulatory challenges, policy gaps, urgent reforms needed at the University Grants Commission (UGC), and presents a bold vision for unlocking the full potential of private universities in Bangladesh.

Dr Md Sabur Khan is founder and chairman of Daffodil International University (DIU) and currently chairs both the Advisory Council of the Association of Universities of Asia and the Pacific (AUAP) and APUB. A respected academic, entrepreneur, and policymaker, he is also Treasurer-elect (2027–30) of the International Association of University Presidents (IAUP). His extensive experience positions him as one of the leading voices in higher education in Bangladesh.

**You have become President of APUB at a turbulent and transitional time for both the country and the sector. And your students were a pivotal part of the July Movement. In light of all this, how do you see your role and that of APUB at this juncture?**

This is not merely a transitional phase—it is a moment of profound possibility for higher education and national development in Bangladesh. I firmly believe that private universities are now one of the driving forces shaping the country's future. The courageous participation of our students in the July Movement demonstrated that they are not only learners but active agents in building a more just and accountable society.

In this context, APUB's role has evolved into a new dimension. We are no longer confined to reactive responses or policy critiques. Our mission now includes proactive policy engagement, evidence-based research, constructive dialogue, and collective action aimed at establishing a fair, efficient, and student-centric higher education ecosystem.

Under my leadership, APUB is currently working towards several strategic goals:

- Introducing a performance-based ranking and quality assurance model for private universities
- Strengthening industry-academia partnerships for better alignment with job market needs
- Ensuring stakeholder participation in higher education policymaking
- Facilitating employment and entrepreneurship opportunities for students

This is a defining moment—one that calls for leadership, innovation, and systemic reform. We at APUB are ready to rise to the challenge and lead the transformation our education sector deserves.

**Does the UGC usually consult private university stakeholders before policy formulation or amendment? What is your suggestion?**

Historically, the University Grants Commission (UGC) has lacked a consistent, structured consultation process with private university stakeholders during policy formulation. While there have been occasional dialogues, these often occur after policies are drafted or are limited in scope. This top-down approach frequently overlooks ground realities, operational challenges, and the sector-specific diversity within private universities.

As Chairman of APUB, I strongly recommend institutionalizing a mandatory stakeholder consultation framework—especially involving university founders, Boards of Trustees (BOT), Vice Chancellors, and APUB representatives—prior to any major policy decisions. A participatory policymaking approach will ensure more relevant, pragmatic, and implementable guidelines that foster innovation rather than constrain it.

**Private universities operate without government support. What kind of support should the government or UGC offer?**

Private universities do not receive:

- Any government funding or land allocation

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বাংলা  
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ফখরুল: তারেক রহমান আমাদের ভবিষ্যৎ প্রধানমন্ত্রী



পক্ষাঘাতগ্রস্ত স্ত্রীকে 'জীবন্ত কবর দেওয়ার চেষ্টা'



বাংলাদেশ কর্মীদের জন্য মাল্টিপল এন্টি ভিসা চালু করলো মালয়েশিয়া



তাই শুনে কেন মুসলমান-হিন্দু পিছেতে হটায়...



ফেসবুকে পোস্ট দিয়ে পদত্যাগের ঘোষণা এনসিপি নেতার

- Any government funding or land allocation
- Research grants or subsidies
- Infrastructural or logistical support
- VAT or tax exemptions (despite providing public service)

To ease this burden, we propose:

- Access to national research grants on a merit-based system, as available to public universities
- Tax and VAT exemptions for academic purchases, including books, laboratories, and software
- Land allocation support in divisional and district towns to expand access to education
- Interest-free or low-interest education infrastructure loans
- Recognition of private university faculty for public academic grants and awards

Such support will allow private universities to enhance quality and reach without compromising autonomy.

#### **The quality among private universities varies. Should the UGC adopt performance-based mechanisms?**

Absolutely. The one-size-fits-all regulatory approach unfairly penalizes high-performing, compliant universities alongside underperformers. This is both inefficient and unjust.

APUB strongly advocates for a performance-based classification system—considering parameters such as:

- Accreditation by bodies like BAC, BAETE, ABET, or other international agencies
- Graduate employability
- Research output and citations
- Infrastructure and faculty strength
- Student satisfaction and retention

UGC should reward performing universities with fast-track approvals, eligibility for funding, and greater academic autonomy, while tightening oversight only on non-compliant institutions.

#### **Do regulatory delays hinder growth in emerging disciplines like FinTech, AI, and Biotechnology?**

Yes—significantly. Many proposals for disciplines such as Artificial Intelligence, FinTech, Cybersecurity, Biotechnology, and Data Science have remained pending at UGC for 12 to 24 months, despite market urgency and student demand.

These delays undermine the agility of private universities to respond to the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) needs. UGC must establish a fast-track approval process for globally relevant, industry-aligned academic programs—ideally within a 90-day cycle.

#### **Should the GED be recognized as a graduate program pathway?**

Globally, the GED (General Educational Development) certificate is recognized as equivalent to high school completion. Bangladesh should consider aligning with this standard by:

- Allowing GED graduates to apply for undergraduate programs
- Requiring bridge or foundation courses, if needed, to ensure preparedness
- Preventing dropout risks caused by rigid entry requirements

This would make higher education more accessible for non-traditional learners and diaspora students.

#### **What steps can UGC or the government take to directly support the students more, say, for example, by starting a government-backed student loan program or even scholarships in the private university sector, perhaps with a matching component from their institutions? Is APUB advocating anything like that that will help students directly?**

One of the most pressing challenges we face today is ensuring that talented students from rural and underprivileged backgrounds can access and sustain higher education. The reality is that private universities in Bangladesh receive no government subsidies—for infrastructure, research, or student financial aid.

In this regard, APUB is planning to take a proactive step on two key proposals:

##### **1. Government-Backed Student Loan Program:**

We will develop a preliminary policy framework for a student loan scheme in partnership with state-owned banks and private universities. The goal is to make higher education accessible without financial hardship.

##### **2. Matching Scholarship Scheme:**

Private universities currently provide tuition waivers or scholarships to around 5–10% of their students from their own funds. If the government introduces a matching grant mechanism, this number could be significantly expanded, enabling thousands more to pursue their education without financial barriers.

Our goal is to ensure that no deserving student is left behind due to financial constraints. APUB is in active dialogue with both the Ministry of Education and the UGC on these proposals, and we are optimistic that they will move towards implementation soon. These initiatives are not just financial tools—they are investments in Bangladesh's human capital and future prosperity.

#### **How can private universities promote PhDs, research, and post-doctoral education?**

Private universities are eager to scale up research and PhD programs but face major bottlenecks:

- Lack of PhD program approvals—many proposals are pending at UGC
- No access to national research grants or funding from the Ministry
- Absence of post-doctoral fellowships

To address these issues:

- UGC must immediately approve pending PhD programs from eligible universities
- A dedicated research grant pool should be opened to private institutions
- Industry and government can co-fund post-doctoral fellowships and innovation hubs
- PhD collaboration opportunities with foreign universities should be established under UGC guidance

#### **Private universities pay full VAT and tax despite serving the public. What is APUB's position?**

This is a critical inequity. Private universities pay:

- 15% VAT on rent, furniture, IT equipment, lab tools, and more
- 10% income tax on tuition income
- Full commercial tax rates on land and utilities

Meanwhile, public universities enjoy full subsidies from taxpayers.

APUB is preparing a comprehensive white paper requesting:

- VAT and tax exemptions on educational services
- Recognition of private universities as non-profit public service entities
- Dialogue with the Ministry of Finance and National Board of Revenue (NBR) for policy alignment

We believe this financial relief will directly benefit students by reducing tuition pressure and expanding access.

#### Would a permanent UGC-APUB Working Group help improve higher education?

Yes, and APUB has officially proposed this. A Joint Working Group would:

- Facilitate regular dialogue between private universities and UGC
- Monitor policy implementation
- Address delays in program approvals or compliance issues
- Promote academic innovation and quality assurance

This model has worked well in India (AICTE-private sector task forces) and Malaysia. We urge UGC to formalize this collaboration by Q4 2025.

Final thoughts for our readers and policymakers:

Private universities now educate over 400,000 students, create hundreds of thousands of jobs, and contribute significantly to research, innovation, and internationalization. They operate without government subsidies yet deliver substantial public value.

It is time to shift from control-based governance to enabling regulation. APUB is committed to accountability, innovation, and quality—and with the right partnerships with UGC and the Ministry of Education, we can uplift the entire higher education ecosystem of Bangladesh.

To conclude, I emphasize a few additional priorities:

- Focus on Quality Assurance and Accreditation: A robust, independent accreditation body, potentially under UGC guidance but with industry and academic representation, is essential to ensure accountability and continuous improvement.
- Leveraging Technology for Education: The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted technology's critical role. Government and UGC should encourage investment in digital learning platforms, infrastructure, and faculty training.
- Skill Development and Employability: Stronger collaboration with industry through internships, joint research, and curriculum co-development will produce a skilled, job-ready workforce.
- Promoting Ethics and Values: Beyond academic excellence, instilling ethical values, critical thinking, and civic responsibility is vital for shaping responsible citizens and future leaders.
- Global Integration: Encouraging international collaborations, faculty and student exchanges, and joint research initiatives will enhance global competitiveness and broaden student perspectives.

The private university sector is a significant pillar of Bangladesh's national education system. With supportive policies, collaborative regulation, and a shared vision for quality, we can collectively elevate higher education, empower youth, and contribute robustly to national development.



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