


SME-University Collaborations for Boosting Innovation



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THE business community, not only in Bangladesh but also in the world is constantly pressing universities to change their traditional role of imparting only knowledge to their students. In response to the community's call, universities abroad are now playing three important roles, (i) knowledge transfer, (ii) skills development and (iii) involvement in economic growth of the society.

As Bangladesh is a densely populated and developing country, Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) will definitely provide huge employment opportunity with a much lower investment. SMEs are expected to create jobs, reduce poverty, and drive a resilient national economy. A recent survey has revealed that the SME sector in Bangladesh contributes about 25 per cent to the national GDP, and accounts for about 40 per cent of manufacturing output with 80 per cent of industrial jobs and nearly 30 per cent of the total labour force (Economic Survey, 2013).

The Asian Development Bank reports that there are now over 6,000,000 SMEs and micro enterprises in Bangladesh. The contribution of SMEs to economic growth, social cohesion, employment, and local development is being recognised. But due to globalisation and advancement in technology, SMEs need to know how to enter the global value chain in order to sustain and be competitive. In this context, a question may arise how universities can engage in strengthening SMEs and entrepreneurs. The answer to this question is straight forward. Universities have a wealth of research knowledge, talent, and network connections. The network of alumni working abroad is an invaluable resource for SMEs seeking to export overseas.

Universities can help SMEs in many ways. It encroaches supporting entrepreneurs launch their business and develop technologies and new products and services to providing students for fixed-term projects addressing business challenges such as new product introduction and international expansion.

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high tech-industry, computer software and ICT goods, jute goods and jute mixed goods, telecommunication, electronic business, clothing, and shoe business, plastic industries, cosmetic industry, biogas plant, health care equipment, etc., are fast growing SMEs in this country. Universities can definitely help these enterprises to develop properly. Universities can offer professional development and staff training to help give existing team skills. And once enterprises started working with a university, it will design courses and assessments that meet the needs of local employers.

At the early stages of establishing a small business, investing in technology and facilities can prove risky and expensive. Whether it is laboratory time, high-tech IT equipment or simply space to hold meetings, universities will be able to lend theirs for a small fee. If the field of entrepreneurs matches the interests of a local research team or department, they will work with the entrepreneurs to turn an idea into a real business opportunity. If an entrepreneur comes up with new business but has no idea about its business implication, the researchers of a university can solve it. Universities will find the relevant theory and then distil it into practical tools that the SME can

use to drive business outcomes and improve the bottom line. Obviously, universities can host local economic growth hubs or business incubators to help small organisations and start-ups get off the ground.

The task of a university will be to bring academics and leaders of SMEs in the business, design, engineering and digital sectors together in a cluster in order to map and measure how they can support one another and to produce graduates who can possess innovative quality and thinking skills to become successful entrepreneurs. But universities in Bangladesh are unfortunately falling behind the best in the world, both in terms of human capital and in terms of physical infrastructure and also, in terms of teaching and learning and applied research. Universities are now integrating two goals: the goal of transmitting knowledge with that of emphasising the development of the individual student. Consequently, universities in many countries have shifted their teaching approach from 'convergent' to a 'divergent' one (Miriam Bar-Yam, et. al. 2002). This 'convergent' approach directs toward the teaching of a specified subject matter, whereas the 'divergent' approach focuses on open-ended self-directed learning. The first approach is well-

structured. As it is teacher-centred, the students in a class become passive recipients of knowledge transmitted to them and learning achievements are measured by some standardised tests. On the other hand, the second approach is flexible and student-centred. Students are active participants in the learning process, and learning achievements are assessed by a variety of evaluation tools different from those used in the first approach.

The curriculum for an undergraduate programme is influenced by the social, physical, economic and cultural environment. Consequently, its development process will also change with the change of any such setting or settings. As the creation of jobs by entrepreneurs and SMEs is one of the most important priorities of our Society now, society expects that our graduates can speak and write effectively, have high-quality interpersonal (teamwork) and creative thinking skills; have innovative quality and some understanding of the rest of the world. These are the qualities which are required to become successful entrepreneurs. Universities must have paid greater attention to the quality of the education they provide to students and redesigning curricula to meet the present society's expectation. Universities need to constantly re-think their goals and priorities, their curricula; and also to know the way learning takes place. At the same time, researchers should understand the needs of society and direct their research towards the topics that will serve society.

Finally, it is extremely important that the government must recognise universities as national assets and a window to the country which can make a significant contribution to the development of the nation. The government also needs to frame national quality policy, ease access to finance possess and provide adequate support system; and to set up flexible mechanisms to promote research collaboration between universities and SMEs.

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