"Universities' Social Responsibility (USR) & Sustainability: Lessons from Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Bangladesh"

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Abstract

Universities are increasingly regarded as playing a broader role rather than fulfilling the responsibility of educating youth and developing knowledge. In 1998, a conference organized by UNESCO in Paris, highlighted that social responsibility is increasingly considered an intrinsic aspect of the higher education system, particularly of the universities. This issue is also included in policy statement of International Association of Universities (IAU, a membership-led non-governmental organization working in the field of higher education). Further, University Social Responsibility Alliance was also established in 2008 in San Francisco, for the development of USR in higher education level. In this rapidly changing environment the universities require to engage more in contributing to the betterment of society. However, the social practices of universities seem to be more voluntary-based which is still unexplored. It becomes urgent to reflect upon the role of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the contemporary society. This study examines as to what extent the private universities in Bangladesh are committed to their social responsibilities.

This study uses qualitative technique and the data were collected through multiple methods like Panel Discussion, Direct Observation and Content Analysis. The study reveals that the most of the universities did not have clear guidelines and policies regarding USR & Sustainability. The findings also suggested that universities need to engage more in contributing to the betterment of society through the integration of social responsibility into their policies, institutional management, teaching, research, services and public activities.

Key words: Universities' Social Responsibility (USR), Sustainability, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Bangladesh

1. INTRODUCTION:

Social responsibility is no longer confined to charitable or voluntary activity. It is in fact a broader and comprehensive concept, giving more contribution to organizations in sustainable development. Universities are increasingly regarded as playing a broader role rather than fulfilling the responsibility of educating youth and developing knowledge.   In this rapidly changing environment the universities require to engage more in contributing to the betterment of society through the integration of social responsibility into institutional management, teaching, research, services and public activities.

However, the social practices of universities seem to be more voluntary-based which is still unexplored. It becomes urgent to reflect upon the role of Higher education institute (HEI) in the contemporary society. This leads authors to gain a better understanding about conceptual framework of USR and its effective role in achieving sustainable development.

2. CURRENT SCINARIO OF PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES IN BANGLADESH:

- The birth of private universities in Bangladesh has passed more than three decades. Now their existence is a visual reality with significantly successful stories in most of the cases and with the comparison of performance of our public universities.

- Now private universities are not a substitute for the public ones and they stand by

their own credentials.

- At the initial stage students opted for private universities in case of their failure to get enrolled in public universities but things have changed now proving the growing significance and standard of private universities.

- But, unfortunately most of the private universities have failed to provide the students with quality education and are not complying with Private University Act 2010 properly.

This study will zero in on the existing URS&S practices in private universities.

3. DEFINITION OF USR & ITS SCOPE:

The origin of USR (University social responsibility) concept has derived from Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) literature. The importance of this concept has recognized by many international establishments. In 1998, a conference organized by **UNESCO** in Paris, highlighted that social responsibility is increasingly considered an intrinsic aspect of the higher education system, particularly of the universities.

This issue is also included in policy statement of International Association of Universities (IAU, a membership-led non-governmental organization working in the field of higher education). University Social Responsibility Alliance was established in 2008 in San Francisco, USA for the development of USR in higher education.

In defining USR, **Reiser, J., (2007**), concentrates on the university management's impacts, saying that it is "a policy of ethical quality of the performance of the university community (students, faculty, and administrative employees) via the responsible management of the education, cognitive, labor and environmental impacts produced by the University, in an interactive dialog with society to promote a Sustainable Human Development".

This while **Vasilescu, et al. (2010),** defines USR from the citizenship perspective, as "the need to strengthen civic commitment and active citizenship; it is about volunteering, about an ethical approach, developing a sense of civil citizenship by encouraging the students, the academic staff to provide social services to their local

community or to promote ecological environmental commitment for local and global sustainable development. But, the clearest definition of USR one may consider is the one proposed by **Harkavy (2006)** in the very beginning: "the socially responsible University is expected to be oriented towards actions and values that emphasize that it gives something back to society beyond its traditional outputs of education and research responsibilities"

4. LITERATURE REVIEW ON UNIVERSITIES' SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY FRAMEWORK:

Vallaeys et al. (2009) emphasizes that universities create four different types of impact in their stakeholders: organizational, educational, cognitive, and societal.

Organizational impacts are about the way universities manage their daily operations in the campus with transparency and equity (including but not limited to work climate, student life, environment, suppliers, and all aspects concerning energy, waste, and safety).

Educational impacts refer to the curriculum design which includes ethical and social responsibility topics and projects.

Cognitive impacts that concern with building and producing knowledge, consolidating the relationship between technological and social context of science and the society.

And finally, **Social impacts** that concern with affecting society through fostering progress, building social capital, and preparing students for real world.
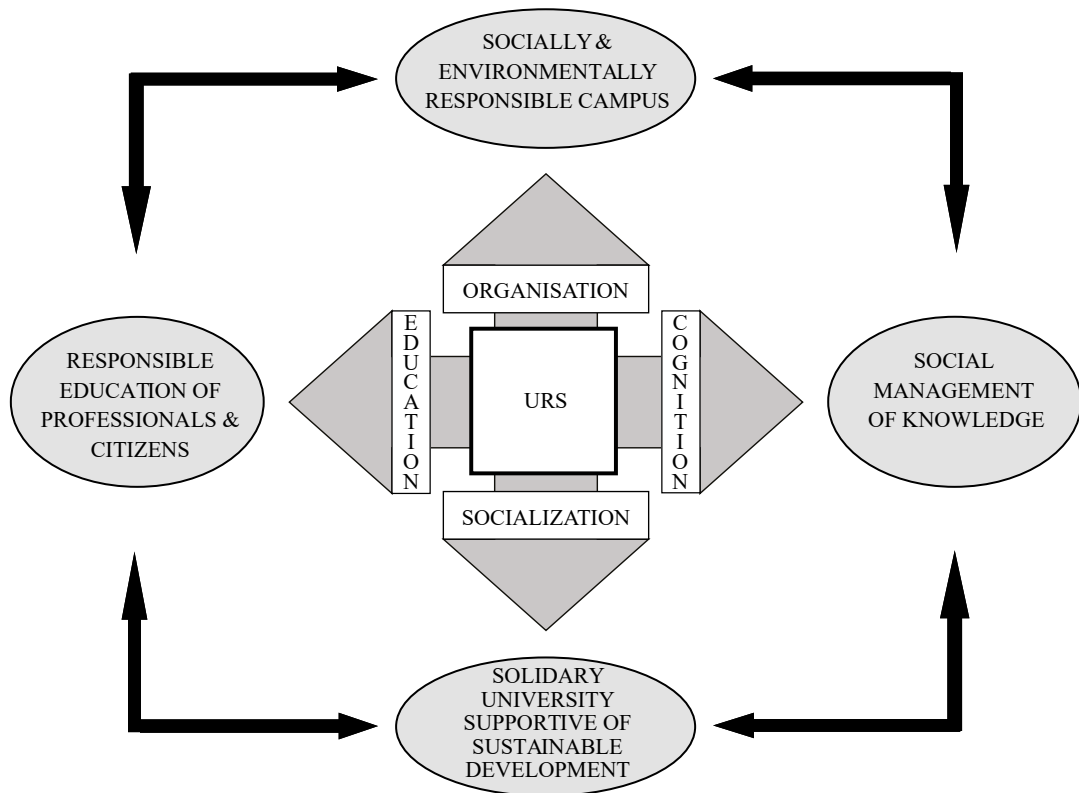
Figure-1: Valleay's Model of University Social Responsibility

In defining USR, **DomínguezPachon, (2009)**, emphasized a set of general principles and specific values, using 4 key processes: Management, Teaching, Research and Extension, through the provision of educational services and transfer knowledge following ethical principles, good governance, respect for the environment, social engagement and the promotion of values. The University has a direct impact on the future of the world for the training of professionals and leaders, but it is also a social actor, which can promote the education of students in accordance with the external social reality, and make knowledge accessible to all.

The practice of university social responsibility has also caught the attention of the Asian regions. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) University Network (AUN, 2012) proposed an AUN University Social Responsibility and Sustainability conceptual framework with the following major components:

(1)   teaching and learning, research and academic services,

(2)   university's governance and administration,

(3)   community involvement, and

(4)   campus life in order to promote USR practice and address the social, economic, and environmental challenges facing in ASEAN Community.

Moreover, USR was founded in 2008 in Thailand to address from a level of true sincerity and friendship in order to fulfill the following, (1) bridging communities, (2) goodwill commitment and (3) sharing beyond border (Pookyaporn, 2011). Pookyaporn explained the common problems in the Thai context for USR practice includes: the environment, sufficient living conditions, mutual respect, integrity, gratitude, and true companionship.

The University of Manchester (2014) presents their strategy for social responsibility that includes commitments to pursue change across the priority areas: Research with Impact, Socially-Responsible Graduates, Engaging our Communities, Responsible Processes, and Environmental Sustainability. As a vision for the future, in 2011 they published the Strategic Plan for The University of Manchester (Manchester, 2020), a plan based on three core goals: academic values, research and social responsibility.

In alignment with the current bottom line for sustainable development, current research (Chen, 2015) has extended the framework to more dimensions based on the synthesis components of existing literature review. The USR components include social, sub-social, cognitive, organizational, philanthropic, economic, ethic, environmental, and educational (SCOPE).

Furthermore, Nejati, Shafaei, Salamzadeh, and Daraei (2011) stated that the top ten world leading universities have all taken social responsibility seriously in line with common CSR practices on their websites including the following areas:

1. organizational governance (accountability, transparency, providing facts and figures);

2. human rights (diversity);

3. labor practices (employment benefit and compensation, leaning and development, providing healthy work and life balance);

4. the environment (preserving the environment and offering specific academic program);

5. fair operating practices (responsible involvement with the public and promoting social responsibility);

6. student issues (providing sufficient information for current and prospective students); and

7. community involvement and development (providing grants for community projects, and providing funding and support to generate and preserve affordable housing).
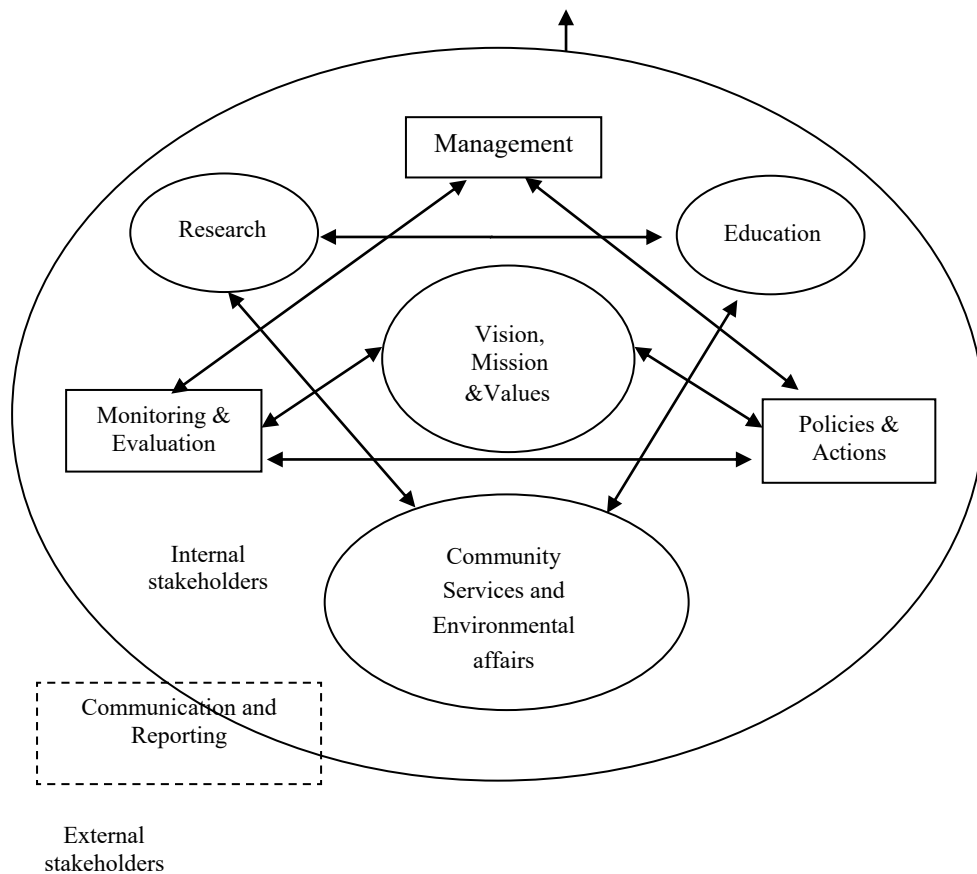

Figure-2: A framework of University Social Responsibility and Sustainability

Mohamed, Alaa Tag Eldin, (2015) proposed a conceptual framework of University Social Responsibility and sustainability. The proposed framework integrated social responsibility with strategic management through the establishment and maintenance of the vision, mission, values, goals and management systems; elaboration of

policies; provision of actions; evaluation of services and development of social collaboration with stakeholders to meet current and future needs of the community and environment.

5. FIVE INTEGRAL PARTS OF USR & S: (CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK)

USR & S recognizes a whole institution approach making those connections between research, teaching& learning and operations.

Universities' Governance:	Teaching, Leaning & Research:
• Vision & Mission • Policies • Strategic Planning • Institutionalization • Accreditation • Enforcing Private University Act 2010 • Accountability & Transparency (Providing facts and figures)	• Curriculum, Content Design & Review • Academic Programs • Social Management of Knowledge • Research with impact • Research Project & funds • Socially responsible graduate
Campus Life:	**Climate Change:**
• Green University • Working conditions • Respect for Environment • Ecological habits • Supply chain • Waste Management / Circular Economy • Participation in Volunteer opportunities • Forums for social & environment purposes • Student Support Services	• Strategy for climate change Mitigation & Adoption • Vision for Net Zero Carbon University • Reduction of Carbon emissions. • Supporting research project • Sustainable campus fund • Use of renewable sources for energy • Responsible Investment for sustainable development

| **Stakeholders& Community Involvement:**

• Internal Services Units
• Academic freedom and an atmosphere of intellectual excitement
• Faculty Learning & Development
• Employee benefits & Compensation
• Academic, Research and industry Collaboration
• Community services
• Communication & reporting | |

MODEL OF UNIVERSITY SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY & SUSTANABILITY

6. STUDY OBJECTIVE & METHODOLOGY:

Research on USR & sustainability and its practices in the context of Bangladesh is at its very early stage. The objective of the study categorizes as: i) broad objective, ii) Specific objectives.

Broad Objective:
- To develop a conceptual framework for University Social Responsibility and Sustainability and its practice in Private university in Bangladesh.

Specific Objective
- To check international standard of USR & Sustainability practices in HEIs.
- To develop a conceptual framework for University Social Responsibility and Sustainability
- To what extent, the private universities in Bangladesh are committed to their social responsibilities.
- To provide recommendations for effective engagement in contributing to the betterment of society and its sustainability.

7. METHODOLOGY

- This study uses qualitative methods for generating primary data. Data are collected through multiple methods like In-Depth Personal Interview, Direct Observation, Panel Discussion and Content Analysis. One of the most suitable instruments to analyze contents of a website is content analysis. This study will also use a content analysis methodology to analyze the website of the 10 selective private universities in Bangladesh.

- Hence, 10 private universities are chosen, and 9 of them are from the list of "Top 20 Private Universities-2019" conducted by Org-Quest Research Ltd. in association with Dhaka Tribune and Bangla Tribune and the remaining one stands out of the list. All the interviewees (Director/Additional Director) are associated with the IQACs of the universities. A copy of Panel Discussion Questionnaire is

attached to appendix A.

- A conceptual framework prescribed earlier has been used to design Panel Discussion. The researchers chose the respondents / interviewees on the basis of proximity and availability.

8. SCOPE AND LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

- The total number of private universities in Bangladesh is 103, out of which 95 are officially functioning. This study only covers 10 selective universities in Dhaka City. The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the discussion over the practice of social responsibility in higher education in Bangladesh.

9. ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION

- Based on the conceptual framework, USR&S can be defined as a multidimensional approach that includes the establishment and maintenance of the vision, mission, values, goals, policies, strategies, and overall institutionalization. The integral parts USR&S includes: Universities' Governance; Teaching, Leaning & Research; Campus Life; Climate Change; and Stakeholders & Community Involvement. The next part will focus on discussing and investigating the different dimensions of the proposed framework with application on private universities in Bangladesh.

Universities' Governance:

- Most of the university did not have well defined mission and objectives. During HEQEP they have written mission and objective. Some of the universities are found innovative because its vision & mission clearly addresses social issues and thus communicated to the stakeholders. One of the universities was found sharing their strategic planning document in their website.

- Vice-Chancellor, Board of Trustees (BOTs), syndicate and academic council are the powerful actors in the universities governance system. All the universities are found to have this system functioning. Few private university Vice Chancellors who are both academically and administratively sound are running the universities

efficiently.

- According to the private university Act 2010, institutions are bound to spend a major portion of their budget for carrying out research work. Private university bodies think that in a 100% private organization, there is no right to government representative to make any kind of representation.

- Very few of them are actively functioning to establish QA practices to meet the criteria for both national and international accreditation bodies. One of the universities has recently received an accreditation certificate named **"Accreditation Council for Business School and Programs" (ACBSP)** from the USA for 10 years without any conditions.

- Most of the universities lack adequate funds to implement social responsibility and solve environmental issues in campus. Very few universities have annual budget for their activities on further improvement.
- As for accountability and transparency, financial affairs in the most of the universities are found not accessible.

Teaching, Learning & Research:
- Most of the universities review their curriculum every 2/3 years, but they are yet to design outcome-based (OB) curriculum. In compliance with IEB (**The Institution of Engineers, Bangladesh**) accreditation few universities' engineering departments (**Civil, EEE & CSE**) have managed to prepare **OB curriculum**. In the process of reviewing curriculum, eight universities have included an '**Industry Advisory Panel'** comprising of minimum three professionals/experts. However, the universities also think of including the alumni as a major stakeholder in the process.

- Universities are mostly "teaching universities" that produce graduates for the job market in both public and private sectors. Since the private universities do not have UGC permission to run MPhil/PhD programs, they give just

professional degrees.

- Unfortunately, most of the universities' graduates are found to be lacking of global skills/soft skills, communication, leadership, critical thinking, team-building, problem-solving, time-management, self-esteem, empathy, resilience, integrity, sense of responsibility, self-motivation and so on. Some of them are related to personal competence and some are social competence. They are also called "life skills" which are much needed for the graduates to cope with the fast-changing society world.

- Research is an integral part of higher education because it makes teaching-learning effective and practice-oriented. Through research both the teachers and students can contribute to the sustainable development of the community/ society as a whole. But, unfortunately research is seen as a neglected area in most of the universities. Within the universities, there is a distinct lack of interest in research and creating new knowledge. Very few universities have annual research fund for the faculties. One of the universities has **"Office of Research"** administered by a director**,** which offers internally & externally funded research projects annually in multi-disciplinary areas including Environmental science & management. This office also encourages faculties to publish articles in indexed journals (SCOPUS) and to attend international conferences/seminars. This division allocates funds annually. One of the interviewees claims that they have an **'Institute for Environment and Research & Development' (IERD)** that also offers funds to faculties for research and conferences. Another university has **'Center for Research & Training (CTR), which** publishes Journal, multi-disciplinary research papers, Working Papers, and provides research facilities & grants as well as organizes knowledge sharing seminar. One of the universities has **"Institute for Advanced Research (IAR)"** establish in 2019, which awarded research grants for multidisciplinary Projects.

University Campus:
- Adequate physical facilities are an integral part of quality teaching-learning

activities in hiher education institutions. The study finds that 8 out of 10 universities have established their permanent campuses, although most of them do not have playgrounds. Two universities are found well-equipped with IT facilities, and two of them lag behind, although the **IT integration** in teaching-learning activities plays a vital role nowadays.

- Students support services include academic counseling, extra-curricular activities, career & placement, alumni service and community services. The study finds that these services vary from university to university. Few universities regularly organize career fair, events for alumni, social activities as part of community services which enable the students to develop leadership & team-building skills.

- Through few studied universities have permanent campus; a lot of them do not have campus. Some universities already moved to their permanent campuses, but most of the have a plan to build and maintain a new purpose built, state-of the-art green campus. This initiative will enhance the University spirit, thereby creating a healthy and positive environment for the students.

- One of the universities made a strategic movement as a "Green University" encourages their students, staff and faculty to work towards a pollution-free, carbon-neutral, eco-sustainable, and 'go-green' pioneer university campus.

- One of the Universities have Residential Semester (RS) that was unique among higher education experiences in Bangladesh. The program emphasize on Creating a **strong sense of social responsibility** and an awareness of each others' rights and responsibilities as members of society and citizens of a nation.

- A good number of universities have student services that cover Academic Advising, Co-curricular Activities and Career Services and Alumni Relations.

- Most of the universities carry out various social activities through different clubs and forums. The club activities includes: Sports, language, Drama, Art &

Photography, debating, social welfare, sustainable development, anti-drugs etc.

- Some university has a policy of "Zero Torrance" to sexual harassment of any kind.

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Climate Change:
- It was observed that most of the universities have not taken the climate change issues seriously, rather a significant number of universities organize symposiums, conferences, and workshop to raise environmental awareness inside and outside campuses.

- The findings of study shows that none of the universities has clear policies or strategies regarding climate change. However, one of the universities has "Strategic-Plan-2017-2023" that sets targets to reduce energy consumption throughout the campus; reduce carbon emissions as a matter of urgency; reduce water consumption by harvesting rainwater; and increase recycling through a university wide plan of waste management.

- Most of the universities are facing a great deal of difficulties in finding external funds to support research projects related to climate change.

- Most of the universities do not have any departmental entity in the area of climate change. 2 out of 10 surveyed universities have Departments, namely "Department of Environmental science & Management". Assessment of Physical Environment and Its impact on Human Health

- One of the universities has "***Centre for Climate Change and Environmental Research (C3ER)***" which has given special attention to research in the area of adverse impact of climate change on health, food security, poverty and livelihood, displacement and migration, loss and damage assessment, renewable energy, negotiation process, technology transfer, education and awareness, etc. Another university has "**Center for Sustainable Development (CSD)** support active research projects dealing with coastal eco-systems and climate change adaptation, climate change and migration, urban resilience, drought and land and forestry administration. One university has **IDSS (Institute of Development studies and sustainability)** specialize in organizing international conferences on sustainable developments.

Responsibility to Stakeholders & Community Involvement

- To understand the University's stakeholders' needs and fulfill these needs, universities should first identify these stakeholders. An analysis of the university in relation to internal and external stakeholders reveals that universities value their stakeholders (i.e. academic staff, students, non-academic staff, alumni and employers). Most of the universities have special unites, centers and facilities that serve students and faculties. Very few universities have students' accommodation facilities and transport. None of the universities have faculty member accommodation, faculty clubs, Disables Centers or university recycling units.

- For effective governance, academic leadership/faculty freedom is very important. But unfortunately, the academic staff in most of the universities are to **encounter a sort of 'regimented' environment**.

- One of the universities has "**Professional Development Centre (PDC)** dedicated to promoting excellence in education through shared understanding and best practice. Another university had **"faculty development training"** under which some faculty members are nominated to go to conduct different courses (**Mevlana Scholarship, Erasmus Scholarship, Global Access Asia etc**.)   at different

foreign universities, especially in Asia.   Another one has got a **"Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning" (CETL)** which holds trainings, seminars and workshops for faculties periodically. The study also finds a university having a two-week program called **"Improving Learning & Teaching Skills" (ILTS**) for newly recruited teachers. Another week-long program called **"Faculty Development Program"** for the new recruits (faculty) is also organized by IQAC of a particular university. Some university offer research grant for their faculties as a supportive environment in which researchers at every stage of their career can flourish.

- The study also finds that teachers at most private universities also lack other benefits enjoyed by staff at public universities, such as health insurance, pension schemes, holiday pay and funds to support research and scholarship – the latter inflicting long-term damage on careers, as well as undermining these institutions' academic reputations.

- Although some research focus on issues related to various disciplines in the area of environment and social issues, there is a lack of connection between University and external stakeholders in industry and business sectors. Few universities have partnered with international academic and research institutions as well as government bodies. One of the universities has signed a MoU between the **Computer Science and Engineering Department** and **Grameen Phone** where such industry-academic collaboration will flourish.

- Higher education institutions are increasingly asked to be more responsive to the needs of community and to ensure that graduates are truly ready to face the challenges. The findings of the study raise concerns, stemming from lack of involvement in community services by the private universities in Bangladesh. Study findings show that recently, some universities organized a public awareness program to promote **the prevention of Dengue and Chikungunya**. One of the universities participated in "**Campaign for Sustainable Education by UNESCO Club**". It was an event arranged to visit the rights-deprived and underprivileged children of Dhaka, who are part of the BRAC education program. External

stakeholders support and special funds of the university are mainly the sources of the current budget of community service and environmental affairs.

- The communication process will help in raising awareness across the University's stakeholders. As a result the concept of social responsibility and sustainability is gradually spread through the University and community. A moderate number of universities have formal communication campaign through social media, website, annual reports, leaflets, conferences and workshops etc. in raising awareness across the university's stakeholders such as business community, governmental and non-governmental organizations - resulted a gradual spread of social responsibility and sustainability through the university and community.

- The practice of reporting is neither regular nor structured in most of the universities.

10. CONCLUSION& RECOMMENDATIONS:

Understanding the changing environment of higher education institutes and involvement in this change can reshape the role of universities and gain reputation and competitive advantage. Private universities in Bangladesh need to continually rethink, question and reform their role to society promoting social co-operation and cohesion and change values and practices toward environment .Different models of USR found in the literature, however this study proposed a new USR&S framework that has multidimensional approach. Although universities increasingly recognize its social responsibility role to internal stakeholders, community and environment, it has yet to adopt a clear framework to manage practices. The recommendations for better practice are:

- Along with vision, mission, strategic planning, an institutionalization approach is required (like IQAC), to integrate social responsibility concept into university operations.

- According to the private university Act 2010, institutions are bound to spend a major portion of their budget for carrying out research work. But UGC has been unable to enforce it. The attempts of UGC to enforce the law need to be visible.

- The government should amend "Private University Act 2010" urgently by inserting certain provisions – guidelines for social responsibility; working conditions, initiative for climate change, employee welfare, research fund, and service rule etc. – so as to ensure quality education at the universities.

- Government may think of establishing a separate body like University Grants Commission to ensure research and quality of higher education in the private universities. An accreditation council must function immediately which should be independent, neutral and free from the government control and above all belong to both public and private universities.

- Definitely it must not be an agency of bossing or controlling or centre of education policies. It will be a world class organization to enhance research and quality of higher education. Accreditation council must be very

- VCs at private universities need to be more empowered to establish academic freedom and good governance; making financial affairs transparent and spending money on faculty development programs or allocating fund for research and etc.

- Some people say private university students are self -centered, has no social commitment or higher motivation outside their worldly wise pursuit of knowledge. Learning must be purpose oriented. Education doesn't turn people into model citizens, the "Liberal Arts" do. We are in need of liberal arts education -- historical thinking, ethics, economic and political literacy, along with scientific literacy are a prerequisite for a good society.

- Students need to be aware of the University social responsibility, to learn their role and to acquire the necessary skills to engage in job market and develop community. Hence universities need to integrate social responsibility and environment issues in the curriculum of different faculties.Social & environmental issues need to be discussed seriously and sincerely in academia.

- Universities must be committed to establish green university concept, improving working condition & employee welfare, reducing carbon emissions, waste management, investing on renewable energy and supply chain management.

- Private universities are blamed for not doing adequate research work as is mandatory for a university. The Universities should be dedicated to fostering research collaborations across the world with research institutions, research agencies, funding bodies, industrial and commercial partners, sponsors and benefactors.

- There is no dearth of institutes, centres and trusts in our universities, but the effect of their work on society is neither too visible nor far-reaching. We should reverse this cycle and create an environment in which generating new knowledge will be actively encouraged.

- Universities should hold a yearly environmental week to create awareness.

- External stakeholders support and special funds of the university are mainly the sources of the current budget of community service and environmental affairs. Hence it is important to increase the budget of the sector to be able to implement the strategic plan of the university.

- For universities to be socially responsible, it must provide transparent information on the results that it has obtained in economic, social and environmental areas of interests identifying the public confidence.

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