

# What Matters in Determining Students' Preference for Private Universities over Public Universities in Bangladesh

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**Abstract:** This study explores what matters the most in determining students' preference for private universities over public universities for higher study in Bangladesh. One of the key factors was the COVID-19 pandemic. During Covid-19, the private university continued their academic activities but in contrast, the public university failed to do so. During the COVID-19 pandemic, according to a UNESCO report, 1.6 million students were affected in 190 countries globally. According to a study report in Bangladesh, about 40 million students were affected due to the closure of academic institutions. It is believed that it is the most victim area in the country. However, higher education in Bangladesh comprises public universities, private universities, and three international universities. According to the University Grants Commission (UGC) of Bangladesh at present, there are 55 publics and 114 private universities in the country. The number of private universities has exceeded the number of public universities in the last decade. Although the number of public universities is now less than that of private universities, almost all students still choose the first public universities for their higher study in Bangladesh. Then, they choose private universities for their higher study in the country. But in recent years, a changing trend in determining higher educational institutions for tertiary-level study has been observed in the country. Before COVID-19, generally, no private university issued/disclosed a circular

seeking student admission before the admission test of public universities in the country. But during COVID-19, the public universities could not manage to hold admission tests. In contrast, on the other hand, the private university authorities did it. They took admission tests and admitted students to their universities. They also continued their teaching-learning activities without session jams.

This is an exploratory study designed to investigate the transformation of students' preference in determining higher study in private universities over the public universities in the country. A simple random sampling technique was used and as many as 148 students were from 20 private universities in Dhaka city for this study. A questionnaire survey and key informant interview instruments were used for collecting primary data. Primarily, the study reveals that among many others, effective crisis management has a great impact on decision-making to continue teaching-learning activities that influence the students to choose their higher study destination.

**Keywords:** Public University, Private University, Higher education, Bangladesh.

## Introduction

In Bangladesh, public universities have always had a good reputation in terms of providing quality education, providing research opportunities leading to the M Phil and Ph.D. degrees, activities, and a wide acceptance in the local job markets and also abroad workforce participation of their students (Akareem and Hossain, 2012; Mazumdar, 2014). This favorable factor along with low education expenses, the most important factor, had made public universities a highly preferred and first choice for meritorious students in Bangladesh (Ahmed, 2016). Administration and faculty of Private universities expressed positive and higher satisfaction for ensuring effective education rather than their students (Akareem and Hossain, 2012). As students dissatisfied by public universities, the government permitted the private universities to establish and continue their curriculum in 1992 (Ahmed, 2016). However, in recent years, a changing trend in determining higher educational institutions for tertiary-level study has been observed in the country (Ahmed, 2016; Huque, 2014). Before COVID-19, no private university issued/disclosed a circular seeking student admission before the student admission test circular of public universities in the country (Ahmed, 2016). However, during COVID-19, private universities issued student admission circulars and continued their teaching-learning activities without session jams (Nahar and et., all, 2020; Nahar and et., all, 2020). But during this time public universities could not take admission tests for students (Emon and et., all, 2020; Mehareen and et., all, 2021; Mazumdar, 2014). In the last couple of years, it

was observed that some private universities took the First-year honors admission test before public universities, especially Dhaka University. Dhaka University took admission tests for different units till June 17, 2022, with a certain day interval. But some private universities and the Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP) took admission test before Dhaka University (Ali and et., all, 2018). A huge number of students appeared on the admission tests for private universities (Jamil and et., all, 2012). It is a very unusual case in the country (Emon and et., all, 2020). Because generally, no university (both public and private universities) dares to issue a circular for student admission tests before holding the admission test of Dhaka University, the oldest and called Oxford of the East, in Bangladesh (Ahmed, 2016). The normal phenomenon is that no student applied to private universities before the admission tests and completed the procedure of the public universities, especially Dhaka University in the country (Hoque and Islam, 2020; Jamil and et., all, 2012). Now the question arises what makes matters for such transformation in the country? What are the impacts of the outbreak of COVID-19? It is observed that private universities have proved more efficient in crisis management following their continuation of teaching-learning activity, and adaptability to new normal and student-oriented policies during the COVID-19 outbreak. Moreover, some other factors such as individual care of students, motivation to cope with any challenging situation, adoption of digital transformation, and so on, are observed for shifting the preference of students to choose private universities over public universities in the country (Ali and et., all, 2018). In addition, student politics, session jams, and reliance on traditional teaching-learning methods are revealed as some major drawbacks of public universities that are considered discouraging factors and compel the students to consider and choose alternative ones as a higher study destination in the country (Huque, 2014).

### **Objectives of the Study**

The main objective of this study was to identify the factors in determining students' choice of private universities over public universities for higher study in Bangladesh.

### **Research Questions**

To realize the objective, the study explored answers to the following research questions.

- (a) What matters the most in determining students' preference for private universities over public universities for higher study in Bangladesh?
- (b) What are the reasons behind choosing private universities over public universities?
- (c) What are the opportunities available in private universities over public universities in Bangladesh?

### **Rationale of the Study**

In the era of ICT and fourth industrialization, every moment is considered very important (Amin and et., all, 2016). It is also applicable to the students and thus they do not want to sit idly for their higher studies (Hossain and Hossain, 2019). There are many papers regarding this but some of the crucial reasons, the author conducted this study. Firstly, a few studies were conducted based on Dhaka city. Considering the time value and need, the students always search for a comfortable zone for their higher study in the country (Islam and Jahnur, 2007). Secondly, there is few papers describing the trends of this system. Keeping in mind the socio-economic context, almost all students seeking higher study choose public universities as a comfortable zone (Nobi, 2018). But it shifted during the pandemic Covid-19 in the country (Mehareen and et., all, 2021). Lastly, only some research papers are available which explored impact on education sector due to this pandemic. The public university could not take admission tests during the Covid-19. Consequently, a session jam has appeared in public universities (Emon and et., all, 2020). On the other hand, the private universities took admission tests and admitted students (Nahar and et., all, 2020). As a result, the students of private universities are leading in the perspective of the academic year more than that of your coin counter-public university (Nahar and et., all, 2020). Therefore, it raises the question: what makes matter to choose a private university for higher study in the country? Is the session jam the only reason to choose a private university over a public university? Are there any other reasons?

### **Literature Review**

According to UGC, there are 55 public universities and 114 private universities in Bangladesh. Most of the students have a keen interest in taking the higher education from the public universities (Nobi, 2018). However, a large number of students, who did not get a chance or desired subjects or university, may choose a private

university (Hoque and Islam, 2020; Islam and Jahnur, 2007). There are many factors for choosing private universities over public universities in Bangladesh. During Covid 19, it had a large impact on the students. At that time, the students might rapidly and continuously complete their studies within their period (Islam & Salma, 2016). The students of public universities could not continue timely. As a result, there might arise various questions as, to why many students prefer private universities to public universities (Ali and et., all, 2018; Nobi, 2018). Medium of instruction plays a crucial role to enhance the quality of education (Rahman and et., all, 2020). Qualities of all universities vary from university to university due to environment, university size, financial and others capacities (Rouf and et., all, 2015).

Sultan and Tarafdar (2007) measured the quality of education at private universities by fourteen factors as they thought that these institutions are growing fast and considered as worthy.

Online education systems cannot provide effective results as like as offline (Islam and Mahmud, 2022). There may be many factors for this such as inadequate internet facilities, financial issues, lack of adjustment to technical support, and insufficient connection with class instructors, etc.

Afrin discussed her paper that branding of universities attract the students more that does not only include the logos or designs but also coverage the educational quality, teacher's availability, and success ratio (Afrin, 2020). As a result, students can establish trust on the private universities rather than public universities. Campus environment plays a crucial role for taking much more attention (Afrin, 2020).

Nahar et al, explained in their paper that Covid 19 impacts students. The psychological impact is one of them that badly affects private higher educational institutions. They described the impacts due to COVID-19. Academicians along with non-academicians lost their jobs. Consequently, they faced trouble concerning salary during that time. Moreover, they recommend solutions to tackling these problems.

Emon and et. al described their study, and they discussed the impacts on primary, secondary, and higher education, which includes the struggle of remote areas along with its networking. They explained their data generally. They focus on all sectors such as people's livelihoods, education, accommodation, etc.

Islam and Salma (2016) mentioned about environmental and developmental education in Bangladesh. Private universities have contributed in all sectors including job sector by reducing unemployment level, and businesses.

Mazumdar (2014) mentioned in his paper the satisfaction and significance of some public and private university students. He also compared and differentiated between public and private universities. This study analyzed the quality between Bangladesh and USA universities.

Saif and his associates (2016) expressed in their paper, that several factors influence students to take higher study but it is one of the difficult tasks to choose the right university to continue their studies. They emphasize the availability of online services, and the reputation that may influence the students. Islam and Shoron focused on their paper same issues as Saif mentioned. But they mentioned their results differently such as they found that there is a significant association between the preferences and level of study.

Suppramaniam and et., all described that determining private universities had been affected by the decision of the students' parents. They focused on their opinion and explained why students prioritize their guardians' wish rather than their independence.

## **Research Methodology**

### ***Approach***

This study was qualitative and explanatory.

### ***Data sources***

Both the sources—primary and secondary—were consulted for data collection. Questionnaire survey (QS) and key informant interview (KII) techniques were followed to collect primary data. Moreover, two focus group discussions were also conducted to collect primary data.

### ***Sample size***

A total of 148 students from 20 private universities located in Dhaka were brought under the questionnaire survey. On the other hand, as many as 15 KIIs were conducted for primary data. For collecting primary data, it also did in-depth Interviews with 8-10 respondents. The KIIs include private university personnel, public university faculty members, and parents of the students. A Five-point Likert scale was used in the questionnaire to measure students' preference and satisfaction to choose private universities over public universities. The Focus Group Discussion was held with 6 to 8 participants.

### *Sampling*

A simple random technique was followed to select respondents for the questionnaire survey. However, the respondents were selected purposely for this study. The forthcoming section presents data and makes a discussion accordingly. This part explained the number of respondents and categories of the respondents. As many as 15 respondents were taken as KIs while the rest 148 students were brought under survey for the study. The respondents from the student category were selected following the simple random sampling technique.

### *Study area*

The study areas of this study were private universities and public universities located in Dhaka. It presented the number of key informants (KIs) taken from different categories in the study. It showed that five KIs were selected from private universities, four KIs were selected from public universities, and the rest six KIs were selected from parents from both public and private universities. The KIs were selected following the purposive sampling technique.

### *Main questionnaire*

The main questionnaire was divided into four parts. The first part was about the socio-demographic. The other parts were satisfaction of the students, preferences of private universities and its system, performances of the students and universities regarding provisions of services.

### *Google questionnaire*

Most of the respondents filled up the Google form because they felt convenient in that way. This technique was followed as the students used the Internet, and they felt easier and comfortable filling up this questionnaire rather than a manual questionnaire.

### *Checklist*

The checklist was developed to collect information from Key Informants.

### *Data collection techniques*

The study collected data from interviews, questionnaires, focus group discussions, and in-depth interviews. The interview was held face-to-face.

### *Data analysis*

This study analyzed the data statistically. It provided a descriptive analysis. The bar charts, tables, and pie charts were automatically established.

### *Ethical consideration*

The study maintained the ethical considerations strictly. No public university students were allowed for this study. Different levels of income were emphasized that might affect anyone to continue one's study furthermore.

### **Result and Discussion**

The following sections present the data and make discussions accordingly. However, the following table 1 reveals the demographic data of the respondents.

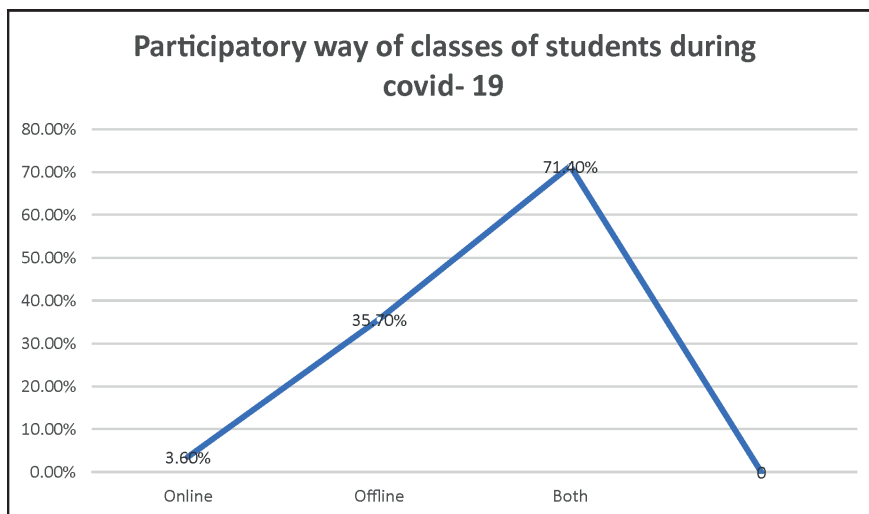
**Table 1: Demographic details of the respondents**

<i>Profile</i>	<i>Frequency (N=148)</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	77	52.0%
Female	71	48.0%
<b>Monthly income</b>		
Less than 20,000	20	13.5%
30,000	27	18.2%
31,000-50,000	57	38.5%
More than 50,000	44	29.7%
<b>Religion</b>		
Muslim	123	83.1%
Hindu	22	14.9%
Christian	3	2.0%
Others		
<b>Education qualifications</b>		
Undergraduate 1 <sup>st</sup>	36	24.3%
Undergraduate 2 <sup>nd</sup>	35	23.6%
Undergraduate 3 <sup>rd</sup>	33	22.3%
Undergraduate 4 <sup>th</sup>	25	16.9%
Master's	19	12.8%

The sample size of this study was 148 selected from the private universities in Bangladesh. Table 1 displays the detailed demographic background of the



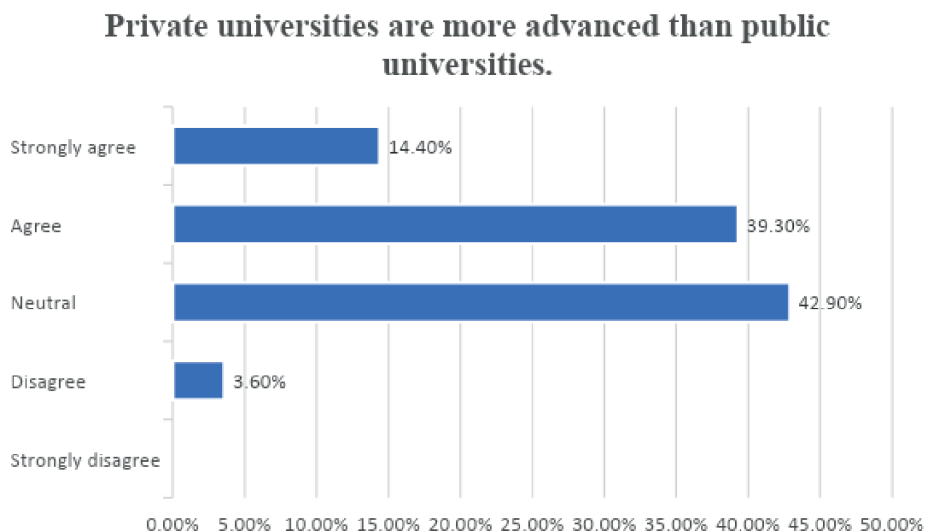
participants. About 48.0% of the students were female while 52.0% were male. Most of the students were at the undergraduate level while a few were at the postgraduate level. Almost 77.8% of the students participated from the urban areas while 11.1% participated from suburban and the rest (3.7%) from the rural areas and 7.4% from others. Most of their earning members are one (64.3%), and a few are two (32.1%) and the member of more than two is 3.6%. The findings of the study revealed that students preferred to choose private universities during COVID-19. Most of the students are choosing private universities for quality education (57.7%), some are for no session jam (26.9%), and others are for no political interference (15.4%). The study also found that they are very positive about the private universities rather than public universities. 70.4% are got admitted at their desired subject, 18.5% are not getting chance to public university and the rest is 11.1% for the potential scholarship opportunity. Most of them are attracted to the up-to-date (53.6%) and some are to grooming sessions (46.4%). Students dislike public universities for some reasons such as political interference (46.2%), sessions jam (46.2%), lack of software skills (3.8%), and no reason (3.8%).



**Figure 1: Participatory way of classes of students during COVID-19**

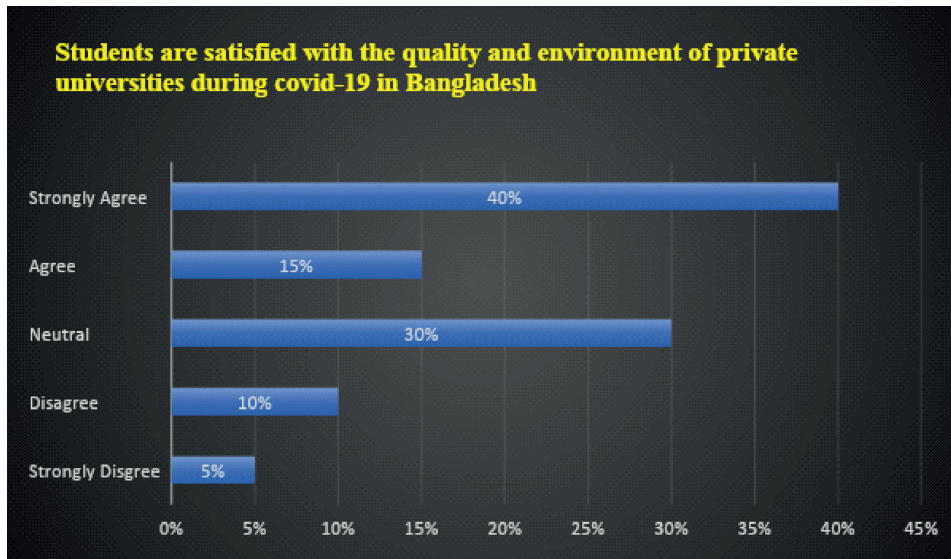
**Explanation:** From this line chart, we can see the ratio of the respondents about the participation ways of classes. The lion's share is for both that is 71.4%, whereas students are participating in their classes offline 35.7%, and online 3.60%.

Besides these, their graduation is completed timely (82.1%) and a few are lengthy (17.9%). Moreover, 64.3% of students agree with the statement of attraction to the private universities day by day and disagree with 3.6% and 32.1% respond as may be. The study reveals that 82.1% believed that all students are not coming from a higher-class family, 10.7% believed that they are coming and others are neutral (7.1%). Almost 57.1% of students think that private universities always pressurize to cope with difficult situations, 21.4% of students do not think so and 21.4% are neutral. According to private universities students' responses, 81.5% think broadly whereas 14.8% think narrowly and 3.7% think individually. It can be cleared that students of private universities can take positively any matter, any culture or issues whereas students of public universities cannot easily take anything because of belonging to a different environment. Even the competition level among them is also very high.



**Fig. 2: Private universities are more advanced than public universities**

**Explanation:** the above figure 2 reveals that private universities are more advanced than public universities. Here, they strongly agree 14.4%, agree 39.3%, neutral 42.9%, and disagree 3.6%. They think that they are getting more advanced facilities that public universities have not introduced yet. Though some public universities introduce those facilities, they do not upgrade them. They think that private universities are continuously coping with the digital era. Diversity is their main focus.



**Fig. 3: Students' satisfaction with the quality and environment of private universities during COVID-19 in Bangladesh**

In this figure 3, it is revealed that students are satisfied with the quality and environment of private universities during COVID-19 in Bangladesh and it is also to find out another result, the level of students' satisfaction for private universities during COVID-19.

### **Qualitative Data Presentation**

For this study, as many as 15 respondents were interviewed as the KII. The major parts of the data are presented below.

The private university personnel observe that students prefer private universities for their higher study for many reasons such as there being no student politics, no session jams, no raging incidents, no torture either physical or mental by senior fellows and so. Moreover, private universities are now more conscious of quality education. They are providing market-oriented quality education to students so that their graduates can fit themselves in the job markets. The respondents also observe that they take care of the students individually which is very absent in public universities. Teachers of the private university are very conscious of their student's progress in terms of learning subject matters. The private university personnel further observe that students prefer private universities because private

universities are always updated in terms of providing teaching-learning methods, using technology, and designing course curricula keeping in mind the job nature of the domestic and global sphere. One of the KIs asserts that

*'they provide scholarships to students, especially the poor and meritorious students. Besides, scholarships are also provided based on their academic results. Students of private universities have, in many cases, opportunities for credit transfer in different universities abroad which are absent in the public universities.'*

On the other hand, almost all the KIIs of the public university faculty category observe that some affluent families consider private universities for their children for higher study in the country. They also observe that despite some limitations, public university is still the major comfortable zone for students for higher study in the country. Low tuition fees, residential facilities, a natural environment, huge qualified faculty members, and lab and research facilities are the major features of public universities that are absent in private universities. However, they observe the existing student politics, session jams, lack of management capacity in crisis periods, lack of individual care of students, and torture by senior students in the name of ragging are the major drawbacks of the public universities in the country. Two of the KIs think that in the context of Bangladesh, the demand for public universities for higher study will never be decreased. They observe that

*'A huge number of students passed the higher secondary level certificate examination in the country. The private university cannot accommodate such a huge number of students for higher study. Moreover, the students will also not be able to pursue their higher study in the private universities with high cost.'*

One of the KIs observed that now some middle-class families are sending their children to private universities for higher study in the country. Despite financial hardship, they do this due to the existing culture of public universities.

Another KI observes that except for a few public universities will turn into *government primary schools* shortly if the present situation continues.

However, parents are very much conscious about the higher study of their children. They want a safe and secure environment in higher educational institutions.

They do not want to see incidents like the *killing of Abrar at BUET and Abu Bakar at Dhaka University*. The parents are worried because such incidents occurred at higher educational institutions in the country. They blame the mainstream political culture for such incidents. Considering the current phenomenon, affluent family is now choosing private universities for their children for higher study in the country. *'If possible, they send their children abroad*, one of the KIs asserts. Another KI thinks that in spite of financial limitations now some middle-class families are also choosing private universities for their children. Most of the KIs observe that private universities are now doing well. But it is not enough. *'The UGC has a great role in improving the quality of private universities. The capacity of the UGC should be enhanced to monitor the activities of the private universities properly'* as they observe. However, all the KIs observe that

*'the educational cost in private universities is high. It should be lessened, considering the socio-economic condition of the country.'*

After the foregoing discussions, it is revealed that not only affluent families but also middle-class families are now choosing private universities for their children for higher study in the country. Current student politics, session jams, and lack of updates on public universities considering the global phenomenon are the major drawbacks of public universities that push students to choose private universities for higher study in the country.

## Findings

Based on the study, major findings are stated below:

### *Adequate facilities of the ICT sector in Private universities*

This study explored the pros of the educational facilities of private universities. ICT facility was one of them which provides regular and high speed internet connections for teachers and students, remote learning opportunities are available during COVID-19 that might reduce their time and session jot than the public university. Their research activities are also very much advanced as they are using upgraded machineries. One of the respondents responded about their facilities, they get the opportunity for working as a research assistant in their research lab and they might show this as their professional experience.

### *Effective educational program systems*

During this study, it explored that the effective educational programs of their universities are higher than public universities. They mention some issues including their practical curriculum, career plan and global issues. Their curriculum is a two-way system. The teachers deliver their teaching content and take feedback from the students. They regularly track their progress by guiding their positions. One of the students while conducting the survey, mentioned that if a student failed in any exam, the students and the course instructors are asked to know the issues and take appropriate actions to improve the results of the student.

### *Absence of political violence*

The private university follows its rules and regulations. It plays a neutral role in the political aspect. It motivates students and nurtures them to be career-oriented. They emphasize on higher studies rather than politics as it deviates the students from their careers. Due to absence of the political violence on campus, students may perform their best in their studies.

### *Availability of canteen, residential and library facilities*

The environment of the private university is very healthy. It provides some residential facilities with security, open access to the library, and nutritious food in the canteen. Students can create social interaction while they are taking their food in their cafeteria. They can also enhance their knowledge by getting open access to worldwide journals in their library.

On the other hand, in public universities, students face a lot of problems. Some of these are presented below.

### *Lack of proper grooming sessions*

In the public university, students are not as well-groomed as in the private university. Some issues raised during the conducting of the study. It includes the lack of professionalism of the teachers as they are not accountable to their higher authority. Sometimes they do not take the class regularly, most surprising issues is, some teachers do not inform their students that they will not take the class for the next day. Students have been suffering for this issue a lot.

### *Services are provided late*

The service procedures are as late as other public services. Another respondent said, "Whenever the students go to the registrar building, the officers say that, come to after the lunch period." Besides, the students cannot pick up their documents promptly if they want them in their emergency period. As a result, the demands of the students are filled up very late.

### *Narrow scope of research facilities*

The students of the public universities are deprived of the research facilities. Majorly, the students of the social science faculty may not get the research lab facilities. Even if their academic scope is limited, they have to learn the software from other institutions at a higher cost. It discourages their mentality to contribute to the new research.

### *Massive political violence*

This is the major and worst aspect of the public university. Politics is important for a country but haphazard politics is harmful to the students. Many students are deviated from their study after involving in the politics. They miss their class and exams. Sometimes, they claim to have passed their exam despite having the absence of the exam.

### *Unavailable computer and technological facilities*

It is true that, the public university provides the technological facilities but not sufficiently. All students cannot get access to their lab due to the shortage of computers and other opportunities. Consequently, the students get demotivated for their study and research activities.

### *Limitation of the study*

1. **Fear of people:** Since this study included all of the students of the private universities, many students were afraid of providing their socio-demographic information. Despite disclosure of the objectives of the study, some respondents refused to provide demographic data.
2. **Time Constraints:** As this study took only six months to collect data it was difficult to collect massive information about more details on this issue.
3. **Avoid answers:** Some respondents tried to avoid the answers due to the leakage of their personal information after assuring to keep secret their information.



### Future direction

Future studies should be conducted to learn the current situation and compare past and present situations, as this study represents the reasons for choosing private universities during COVID-19 rather than the regular period. This study may help anyone to know the improvement of the previous issues.

### Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to identify the matters of the students for choosing private universities over public universities in Bangladesh. It explored that the preference of students between private and public universities during COVID-19 is highly influenced by some crucial factors. By conducting this study, it proves that both public and private universities have faced the challenges of the pandemic situations. Safety and security may have played a significant role in attracting students to take higher studies. Financial resource is another significant factor that helps to develop the infrastructures, technological advancement, and environmental issues. It also ensures the safety of attending the classes of students. The environment is really important for the novice that may help them to adapt the new culture easily. It also ensures the comfort zones who are seeking to continue their study in uncertain situations. Moreover, the quality of education is different to public universities which provides a driving force behind students' enrollment in private universities. As the class size and students' number are limited or fixed that may help to build a strong connection between the students and teachers of the private universities. Furthermore, they perceive their reputation and prestige in such a way which can create or provide the greatest opportunities for career growth and academic achievement. Despite their tuition cost is high, they also lead the students to make their careers easier. In developing countries like Bangladesh, the government should focus on improving the quality of education in the public universities so that students and their parents can keep trust on public services (Ahmed, 2016).

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