The Daily Star

Rethinking the seven colleges conundrum

Dr Kazi ASM Nurul Huda
is associate professor of philosophy at the University of Dhaka. He can be reached at huda@du.ac.bd.

KAZI ASM NURUL HUDA

The recent clashes between Dhaka University (DU) students and those of the seven affiliated colleges reflect a crisis that is far more profound than administrative inefficiencies or infrastructural shortcomings. These clashes have become a recurring spectacle, underpinned by the students' sense of alienation and the systemic challenges that have plagued the reaffiliation of these colleges since its inception nearly eight years ago. The decision for a "respectful separation" from DU may seem like a solution to the immediate unrest, but it fails to address the underlying issues of identity, governance, and practicality at the core of this crisis.

At the core of this problem lies an unresolved duality that extends beyond student grievances—the conflicting dynamics within the teacher class. DU faculty operate within an academic hierarchy rooted in institutional autonomy and governance, while teachers of the seven colleges closely identify with their status as BCS cadres, tied to the rigid hierarchical structure of the civil service. This divide creates a mental chasm between the two groups, as BCS teachers, despite their roles as educators, often prioritise bureaucratic prestige over academic engagement. The inflexible nature of this divide has exacerbated tensions and rendered collaboration within the affiliation increasingly untenable, potentially contributing to recurring student clashes. Addressing this fundamental divide should have been central to any long-term solution, yet it has been persistently overlooked.

For the students of the seven colleges, the situation is equally complex. The core issue extends beyond administrative inefficiencies, infrastructural inadequacies, or grading and financial grievances; it lies in their deep sense of alienation and lack of belonging. The affiliation of these colleges with DU was, from the outset, a move fraught with contradictions. On paper, the colleges were placed under DU's umbrella, but in practice, they were left in a liminal state—no longer part of the National University (NU), yet never fully accepted as DU students. This sense of exclusion is evident in the students' repeated demands to have the word "Affiliated" removed from their certificates, allowing them to identify fully as students of Dhaka University.

This identity crisis is not merely symbolic; it carries profound emotional and psychological consequences. For eight years, these students have lived as "stateless" learners. They are not recognised as DU students by society or DU students themselves, and even their academic guardians have reportedly questioned their legitimacy with remarks like, "Who are you?" Such words are not just momentary slights; they symbolise years of denial and alienation. The students had entered this affiliation hoping for a "superior" identity, but instead, they found themselves in a void, stripped of both their former NU identity and the full prestige of DU.

Students of seven colleges block Science Lab intersection in Dhaka on January 26.

PHOTO: **PRABIR DAS**

The root of the seven-college crisis lies in the flawed decision to affiliate these colleges with DU without a clear vision for integration, a decision that may have stemmed from a "personal rivalry" between two former Vice-Chancellors of DU and NU. This arrangement created an impossible situation: students were promised the prestige of DU but were denied its substance. Their resistance to any move of reaffiliation with NU is, therefore, understandable. Returning to NU would feel like a step backward—a painful admission of failure and a loss of even the limited identity they have managed to forge under DU.

Yet, the alternatives are equally fraught. Establishing a standalone university for the seven colleges may appear to be a solution, but it comes with significant educational and environmental risks. It would set a dangerous precedent by triggering a domino effect of similar demands from other old, large colleges across the country, ultimately destabilising the higher education system. Bangladesh already struggles to maintain quality in its existing universities—not even DU, its flagship institution, meets international standards. Expanding the number of universities without improving quality would only dilute resources further, multiply existing problems, and create new administrative challenges. As a missed opportunity, the previous government, while focusing on establishing new universities in all districts for reasons that remain invisible yet understandably ill, could have instead prioritised transforming these old, large colleges into universities. This would have been a more logical step than setting up new institutions in areas where these historic colleges already exist.

This missed opportunity ties into a broader issue of urban planning. Dhaka, already overwhelmed by overpopulation, traffic congestion, and crumbling infrastructure, cannot accommodate another large university. The conversation about addressing the seven-college crisis must also consider the city's long-term sustainability. Decentralisation—relocating major institutions such as Dhaka University, BUET, BGB headquarters, readymade garments factories, and even the cantonment to the city's periphery—is essential to make Dhaka functional and liveable. Adding another institution of the size and scale of the seven colleges would only worsen the already critical strain on the city's infrastructure and liveability.

Continuing the affiliation with DU, albeit with significant reforms, appears to be the most viable option. These reforms could include establishing a separate administrative structure for the seven colleges under DU, such as appointing a dedicated pro-vice chancellor and an administrative body exclusively responsible for managing the colleges, potentially located in a separate facility. To ensure clarity and efficiency, DU's core departmental faculty should be fully relieved of any responsibilities related to the seven colleges, allowing them to focus more effectively on their own students and research. Teachers for the colleges could be appointed directly through DU rather than the BCS system, empowering them to function as academic leaders on par with DU faculty. Additionally, during an initial transition period, existing college teachers from across the country could be offered the opportunity to opt out of their civil servant roles and join this new system, provided they meet criteria set by an independent committee overseeing the reform of the colleges.

Another practical step towards improving the system would be to reduce the number of students admitted to these colleges. This approach would help alleviate the burden of managing an excessively large student body while simultaneously enabling the colleges to provide better education to those who remain.

Even with these modifications, however, the identity crisis would remain unresolved. While these reforms might mitigate some conflicts, they could create new challenges, particularly in how these students and faculty integrate into DU's broader ecosystem. This suggests that continuing the affiliation with DU, though the best of the three options discussed so far—returning to NU, creating a standalone university, or staying with DU—may ultimately fail for the very reasons that have prompted us to consider alternatives in the first place.

In light of this, a radical yet innovatively transformative alternative worth considering, if all else fails, is to repurpose the seven colleges as exclusive higher secondary institutions, vocational education hubs, or a combination of both. Removing bachelor's and master's programmes could allow these institutions to focus on producing quality higher secondary graduates who could later contribute to the university student pool across the country while also ceasing to be a massive source of unskilled graduates. Additionally, vocational education could address the country's reliance on remittances and the pressing need for a skilled workforce.

The seven-college crisis underscores the need to balance governance with emotional and academic identity. The students of these colleges deserve recognition and dignity, not perpetual marginalisation. Policymakers must look beyond temporary fixes and confront the systemic flaws that have made such crises inevitable.