

## **DROPOUTS AT THE TERTIARY LEVEL IN BANGLADESH: A CASE STUDY IN ASA UNIVERSITY BANGLADESH**

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### **Abstract**

This study focuses on mapping out the factors that work behind students dropping out of private universities in Bangladesh. Due to resource constraints, the study has focused on the case of a university, namely, the ASA University Bangladesh (ASAUB). A mixed method has been resorted to and qualitative as well as quantitative data have been collected from both primary and secondary sources. Dropouts from ASAUB have been interviewed and associated content have been reviewed to better understand the context. The study has revealed that while some factors are common to dropouts of both genders, there are others which are especially applicable for female students (marriage, child birth etc.) and other that are especially applicable for male students too (e.g. taking financial burden of the family). Major academic reasons for tertiary level drop outs are: students underperforming in the tests or exams, students not attending classes and students not getting their desired scores etc. The major non-academic reasons (i.e. factors external to the academies or institutions) are: students confronting financial constraints, students facing difficulties due to changes within their families, students getting more occupied in their jobs etc.

**Keywords:** Dropout, tertiary level, Bangladesh

### **Introduction**

During the last two decades the country has witnessed rapid boom of both public and private universities. On the demand side, with growth of the economy (which most recently has attained the middle income status), the country needs skilled human resource for all broad sectors of the economy (agriculture, industry, and service). On the supply side, due to improvement in primary and secondary levels of education, more people of the country now aspire for higher level of education. Both the supply side and the demand side factors have induced the rapid growth in number of universities. Naturally, the number of student enrollment at the tertiary level educational institutes in Bangladesh has been increased. While all this may appear to be encouraging, it must be noted that the number of dropouts from universities (and other tertiary level institutions) has also been increased. The critical point that is to be noted here is: there are significant costs to be paid by both the individual and the nation for each dropout. In general, dropouts face

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significant challenges to obtaining employment and achieving economic security. At a time, when we count every moment, the dropout rates and the educational experiences of the female students (due to prevailing gender disparities) cannot be ignored.

While the “Dropout” issue is obviously a great challenge for the education system of Bangladesh, the fact remains that there is little evidence-based research conducted over this issue. The reason for this lack may be the fact that education related research in the country has been focused more on quality and quantitative issues of primary and secondary levels of education. More emphasis on lower levels of education may be justified considering the socio-economic and geo-political context in which Bangladesh is situated. But still, it is obvious that the ‘higher education’ will need to be addressed with equal footing if Bangladesh has to achieve the status of a mid-income country or to go even further.

Students dropping out of their studies for numerous reasons and factors (Eisenberg & Dowsett, 1990) range from academic, too non-academic, to other factors (Jones & Watson, 1990), (Tanner, Krahn, & Hatnagel, 1995), (Sponder 1990); health problems (Kaye and Rumble, 1991); and family problems (Allen, 1994), Jordan et al. (1994), Watt and Roessingh (1994). Indeed, students not performing in the academic frontier most often choose to discontinue their education. Numerous studies conducted have pointed out the fact that the ‘poor performers’ at the academy (universities) usually choose to quit studying and pursue different career paths. Studies conducted by Baditoi (2005), Roderick (1993), Lanham (1999), Farmer & Payne (1992), Dharmadasa (1995), Roderick (1993), Smith (1998), Fisher (1994), Smith (1998), De Carvalho (2001), (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Rumberger et al., 1990; Rumberger, 1995), Bridgeland et al. (2006) reveal that dropping out of institutions at the tertiary levels is a phenomenon which is somewhat common to all countries of the globe. And the reasons behind these dropouts are both internal and external to the academic environment. Based on the knowledge about the scenario of other countries (as portrayed in the literature reviewed), the framework of analysis for the investigation about the university level dropouts occurring in Bangladesh (especially in ASAUB) has been developed, which in turn determined the line of inquiry as well as the tools used for data collection.

The overarching goal of the study is to identify the factors working behind the dropping out of the students from universities of Bangladesh in general through investigating the dropouts of ASAUB. The study is based on an analysis of the factors causing the dropping out of the students; and it ends by drawing inferences which may provide guidelines on how the dropping out of the students at the tertiary level educational institutions can be addressed.

**Objectives of the study are as follow:**

- (i) Identification of the factors working behind or the causes of students dropping out of ASAUB.

- (ii) Analyzing the identified causes of dropping out with emphasis on the alternatives (to continuing studies) chosen by the dropped-out students.
- (iii) Using the gender lens for analyzing the causes of dropping out (to identify gender dimensions of the problem).

The study puts forward analysis-based inferences on how to reduce the dropping out of the students from the tertiary level education institutions in Bangladesh.

## **Methodology**

### *Epistemological Approach*

The approach here has been to capture the perceptions of the dropouts about the reasons that have led them to discontinue their studies at the university (ASAUB). These perceptions are necessarily ‘mental constructs’ of the respondents. The investigator has attempted to ensure interaction of the experience/perception of the investigator with the mental constructs of the respondents and then produce a picture of the existing scenario, i.e. a ‘model of the natural world’. Hence, the epistemological approach here is a constructivist one.

### *Method Used*

This study while being primarily a qualitative one has also resorted to quantitative data and quantitative analysis on certain occasions. Qualitative data have also been converted to quantitative charts for better portraying the existing scenario. Hence this is a mixed method research.

### *Sources of Data and Data Collection Tools*

As mentioned above, this study has relied on both primary data and secondary data. The primary data have been collected using semi-structured and open ended questionnaires which were developed based on conducted literature review and the framework of analysis developed for this study.

Secondary data were also needed; and for those content review was conducted. The reviewed content for this purpose are university records that provided information about the students to be interviewed as well as other relevant data needed for the study.

### *Sample*

From 2011 to up to the date of the study, there are about 16881 students enrolled in the ten programs where 334 students were found dropouts. 67% of total dropouts were taken as sample size by simple random sampling. In the round figure, the sample dropouts were 225 students. The samples were drawn purposively to fulfill the objectives of the study.

### *Analytical Framework*

This research aims to point out the reasons working behind the dropping out of students from the tertiary level educational institutions of Bangladesh; and it has already been pointed out in the discussions in the previous section that the plethora of reasons for students dropping out of such institutions can be categorized into two broad groups. These are: the academic reasons (i.e. reasons internal to the academy) and the non-academic reasons (i.e. those external to the academic environment). While the academic reasons are most likely to not vary too much from one country to another, the investigation into the non-academic reasons may require country contextualization.



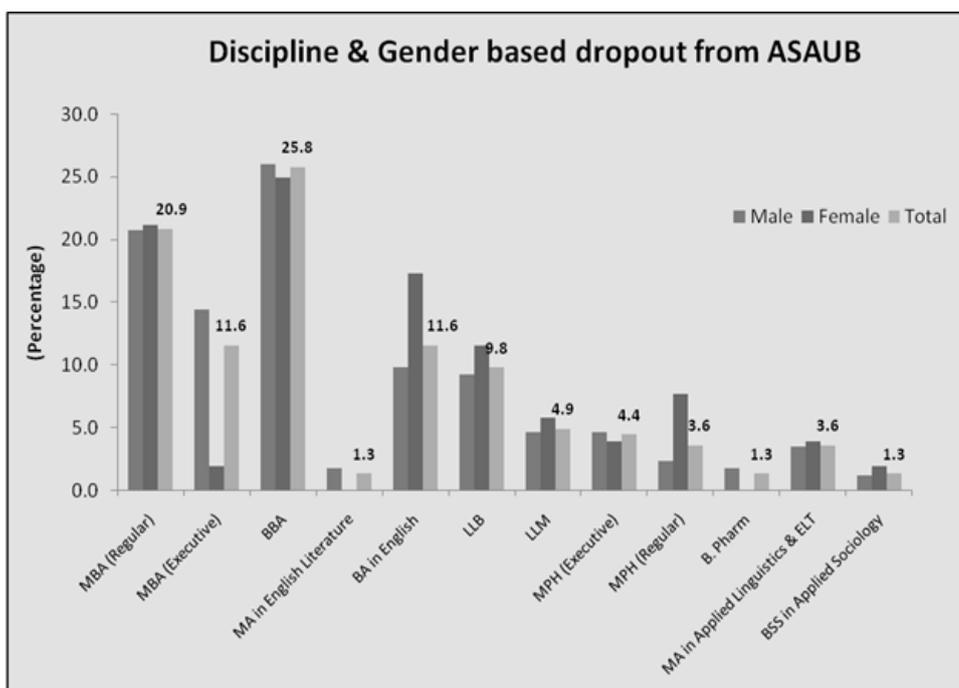
**Fig. 1:** Overlapping between factors of drop out

Bangladesh being a developing country which has earned ‘middle income status’ most recently, the public sector has not been able to provide adequate higher education facilities for the huge number of students passing their HSC exams each year. To cater this demand for higher education, private universities have come to the fore, and it is not only the students from well off families that enroll in private universities; rather the middle class and sometimes even the low income families are sending their children (this has been possible as many private universities are offering waivers to poor and meritorious students). All this necessitates separate treatment of financial constraints as a cause of university level dropouts, instead of limiting attention to this issue under the aegis of non-academic reasons only. And when considering financial constraint as a reason for the dropping out of the students, involvement of students in income generating activities should be considered. This is so, as students being engaged in jobs (fulltime or part time) to bear their educational expenses (fully or partially) and sometimes even provide financial support to their families is most common in Bangladesh.

## Results and Discussion

### *Discipline and Gender Wise Dropout rates at ASAUB*

Sample size was 225 which are 67% of total sample population of the 334 dropouts. From this sample survey the dropout scenario in tertiary level and its causes have been portrayed. The survey revealed the overall picture of discipline and gender wise dropout from ASAUB and it is shown in the following figure.

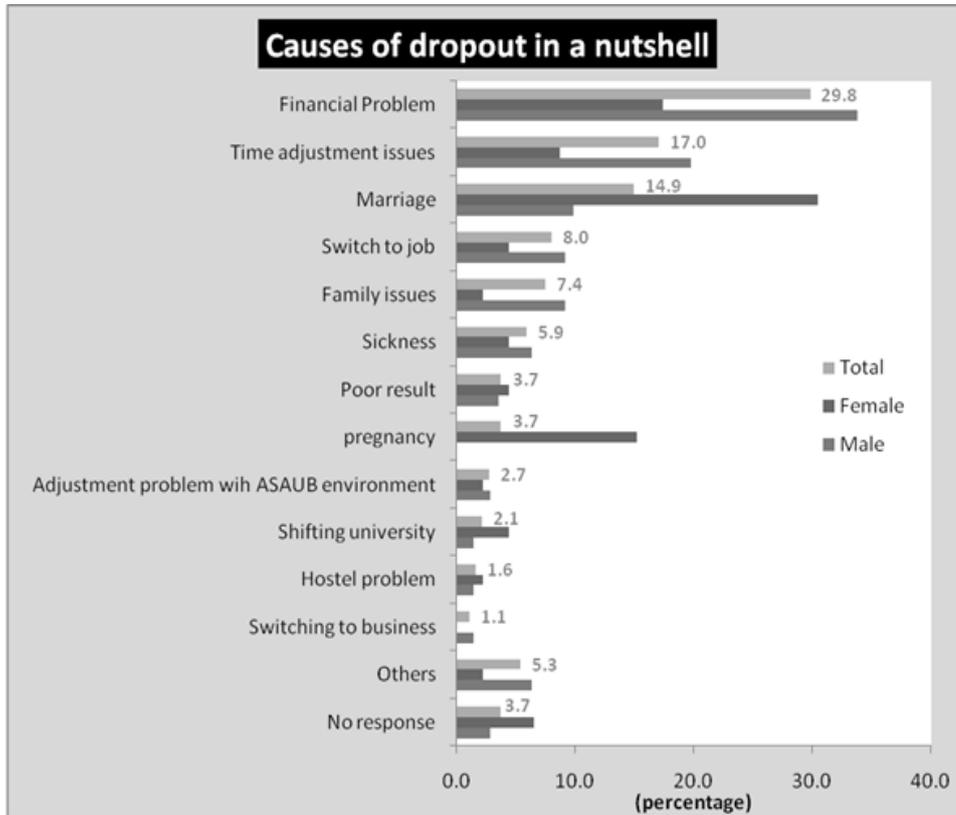


**Fig. 1.** Discipline and gender wise dropout rates (%) at ASAUB.

From the above chart, it can be observed that the highest rate of dropout occurs in BBA and MBA. In general Department of Business Administration experienced highest level of dropout followed by Department of law and Department of English. It can be inferred from the graph that the dropout rate of female students from BA English, MPH (regular) and LLB discipline was higher than the rate of male students. On the other hand, male dropout is higher than female dropout in Executive-MBA. Other than these exceptionalities all discipline had approximately equal gender based dropout rate.

### *Overview of the Reasons*

This research also has identified various reasons behind this dropout. Hence, it is more than important to analyze the causes to have a better understanding of the situation. A brief analysis of causes is given below:



**Fig. 2.** Overview of the reasons working behind university level dropouts.

In the above graph, it is shown that the main cause of dropout was financial problem, time adjustment problem, marriage, pregnancy, continuing job, family problems, sickness, shifting university and hostel or accommodation problem. In the graph other problems covers going abroad, transportation problem, retake issues, difficulties with the subject, etc. issues. Financial problem is responsible for almost 30% dropout which makes it the most important cause of dropout. Marriage and pregnancy are the two major cause of female dropout. Financial problem, continuing job, family problem and time adjustment problem causes higher male dropout in comparison to female dropout. Financial problem is higher for both the genders but it causes more male dropouts than female dropouts.

#### *Academic Causes*

In the following graph, we can see the results of the dropouts at the SSC and HSC levels respectively. Here 77.4% male student got A or A- in their previous educational level. For female student this percentage was 64.4. So this can be assumed that maximum dropout students had good results in their previous educational levels.

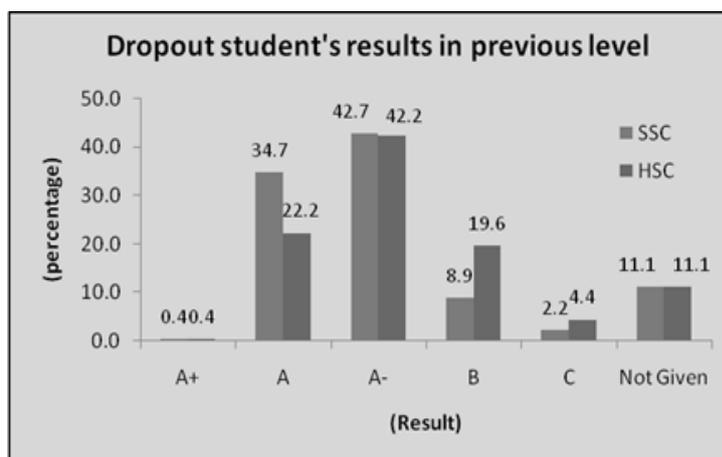


Fig. 3. Previous academic achievements of the dropped out students.

The 9% of the ASAUB’s dropout students had academic problems. The graph below is showing gender and cause wise distribution of these students. About 8% male and 13% female students said that they faced academic problems. So, female students are facing more academic problems than male students. Three main academic causes of dropout were pressure of study, facing difficulties to adjust with the environment of ASAUB and Poor result. These three causes cover 90.6%.

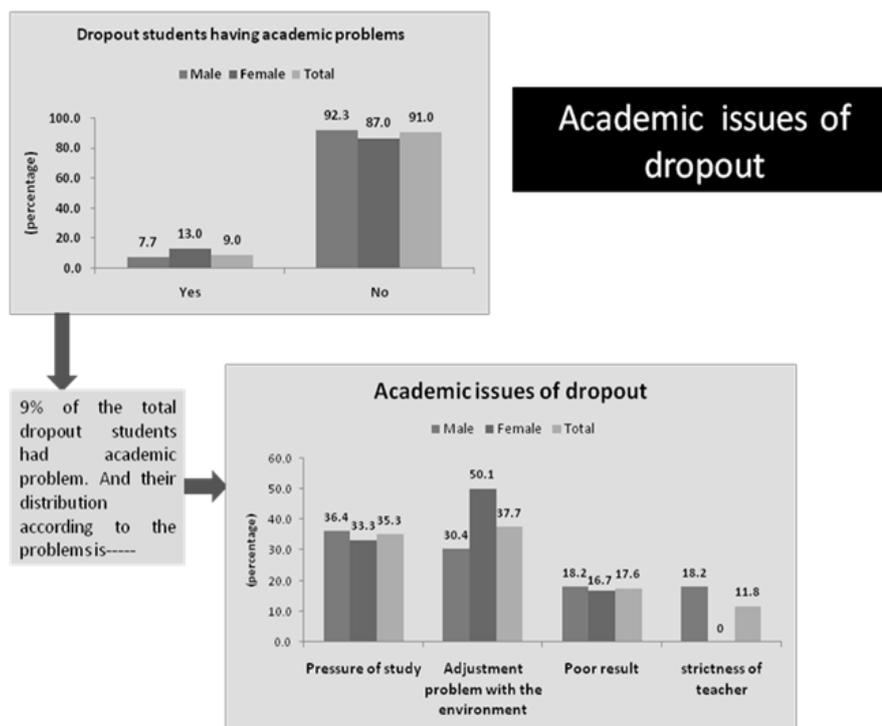
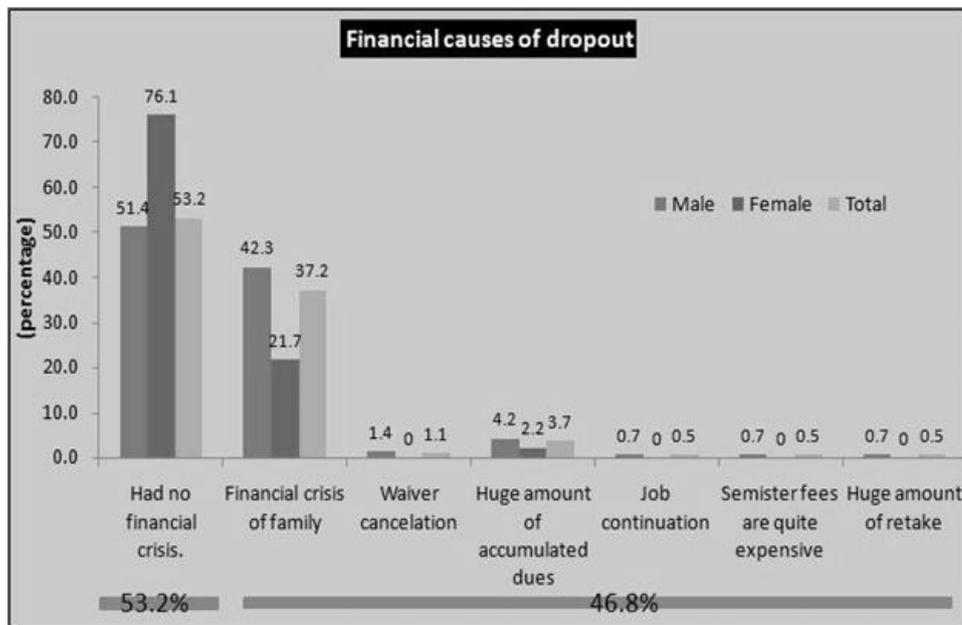


Fig. 4. Academic reasons for dropping out of university.

Gender distribution for pressure of study and poor result is almost same. But female students have been found to be facing more difficulties than their male counterparts to adjust with the environment of ASAUB.

*Financial Causes of the Dropouts*

53.2% of the dropout respondents had no financial problems. Among other 46.8% the dominant financial problem is family related financial problem. Other financial issues are waiver cancelation, huge number of dues and retake, job continuation and expensive semester fees. We can see this information in figure 5. The graph (figure 5) also says that female students had less financial problems.



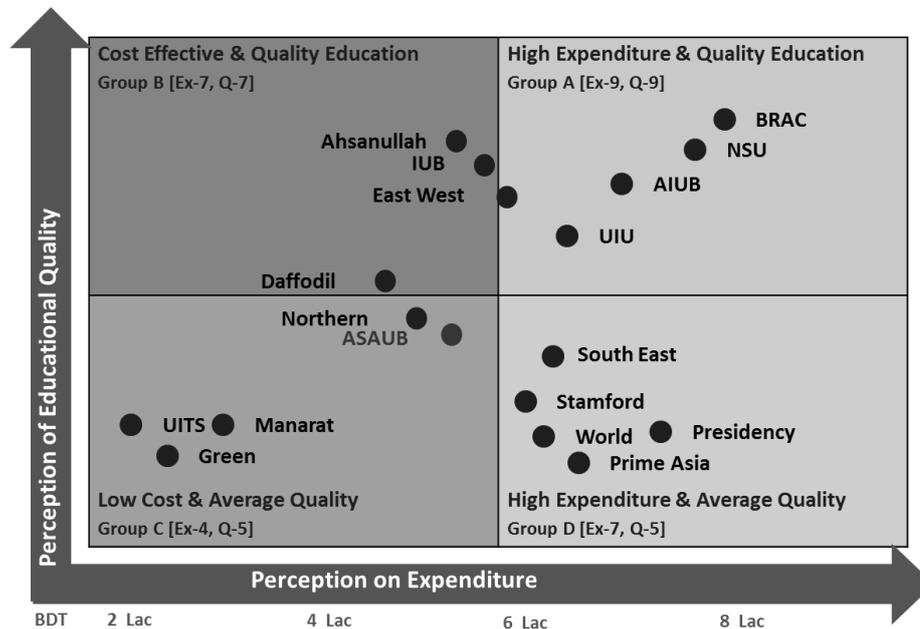
**Fig. 5.** Financial causes of dropping out of university.

Besides cost, it is also rational to consider the quality of education. Hence, the following judgmental analysis is done based on feed backs from teachers, students and parents or community.

The graph above shows the judgmental perception of positioning the private universities in respect to two major criteria - expenditure and the quality of education only. This psychographic analysis has been prepared from in depth interviewing both the students and teachers.

Students and parent’s perception about educational quality of BRAC, NSU, AIUB and UIU universities put them in Group A, who has reputation for quality education with premium charge. As the educational cost is quite high in these universities, they perceive that these universities could lower the cost without compromising their high quality of

education (Fig. 6). On the other hand, teacher’s notion is that high quality educational facility demand higher cost as the operating cost is also high.



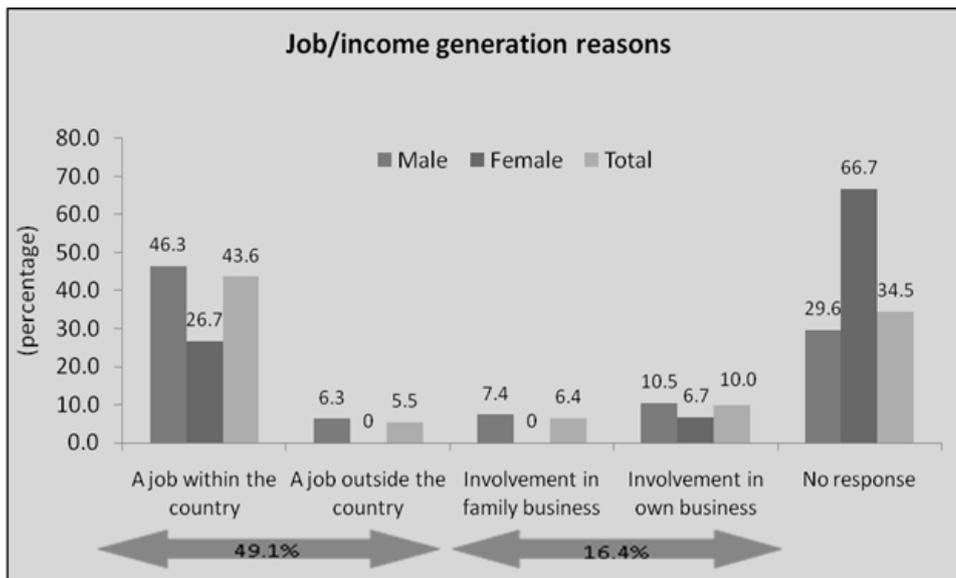
**Fig. 6.** Broad scale positioning of universities on perception of expenditure and educational quality of universities.

Ahsanullah, IUB, and East West universities, put them in Group B, also ensure high quality education with a relatively lower expenditure. Students and parents seeking cost effective education appreciate this strategy. Teachers are also happy with this attempt of these universities but they express their opinion that these universities should increase the quality of education and obviously this attempt will also cause an increase in educational cost.

Daffodil, Northern, ASAUB leads the Group C, who has ensured cost-effectiveness with compromise in overall quality. The better side of these universities is: these universities seem affordable to a large group of parents for its cost structure. If the leading universities can overcome the issues affecting its quality within the present expenditure structure, these universities can put them as strong contender of Group B Universities Green, Manarat and Prime universities remains at the bottom of Group C. Better Teacher-Student relationship, repositioning cost effectiveness could be best instrument for advancing the leaders in Group C. South East, Stamford, and World universities, in Group D, have higher cost but the quality is average than the other universities. Student, teachers, and parent perception about these universities is that these universities should improve quality and they should reduce the cost. Teachers think that if the operational structure of these universities becomes more efficient then these universities can also hold a strong position among other leading private universities of the country.

### *Dropouts Due to Engagement in Income Generating Activities*

From the survey, it has been revealed that 32% student dropped out because of income generation related issues. Of this 32% student, 49.1% left the University for their Job and 16.4% has left the university due to involving in business (Figure 7). From the graph below, it is clear that the main income generation issue is having a job. Sometimes students become compelled to join in the jobs instead of continuing study for their financial problems in the family.



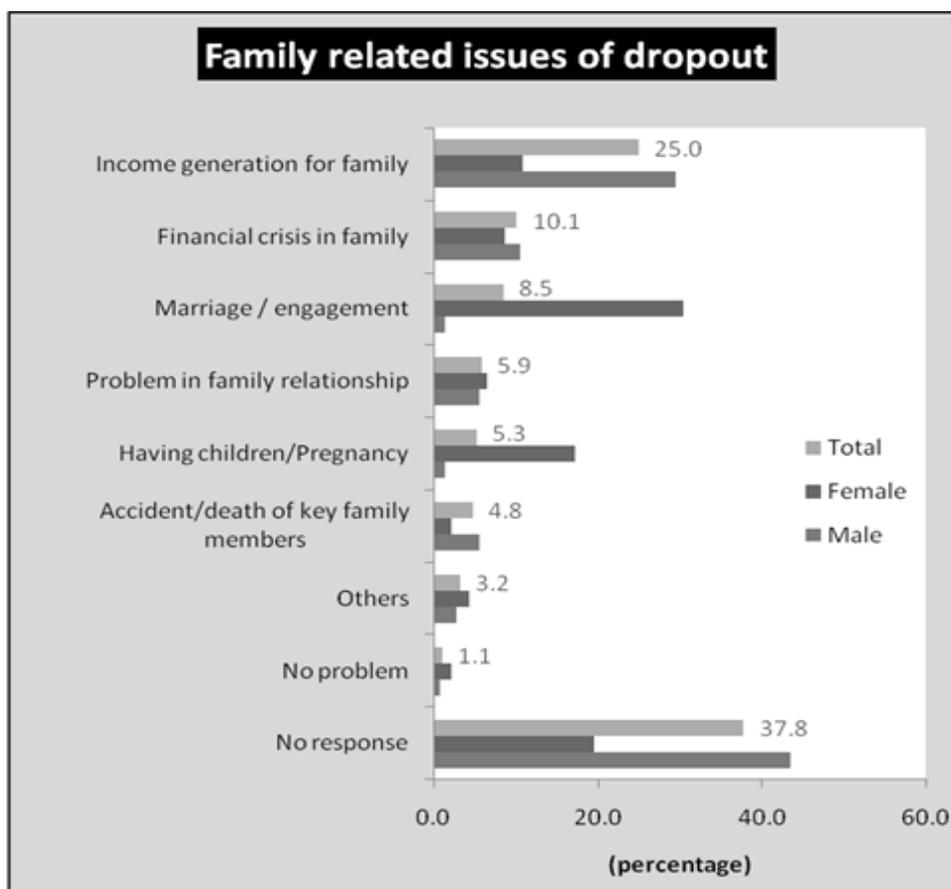
**Fig. 7.** Dropouts due to engagement in income generating activities

### *Family Related Causes of the Dropouts*

In the following graph (figure 8), we can see the family related causes of the dropouts. The main family related causes are getting married, having child, income generation for wellbeing of family, problems in family relationship, accident or death of key family member, financial crisis in family, etc. About 25% student stopped their education because of income generation for the wellbeing of the family. Data shows that it is the most important family related cause for dropout. The graph also shows that male students mostly suffered for this problem.

Females of our society still don't have the power to make their own decisions because of social pressures and traditional prejudice. The data in the following graph also support this statement. Getting married and having child is the main cause for female dropout.

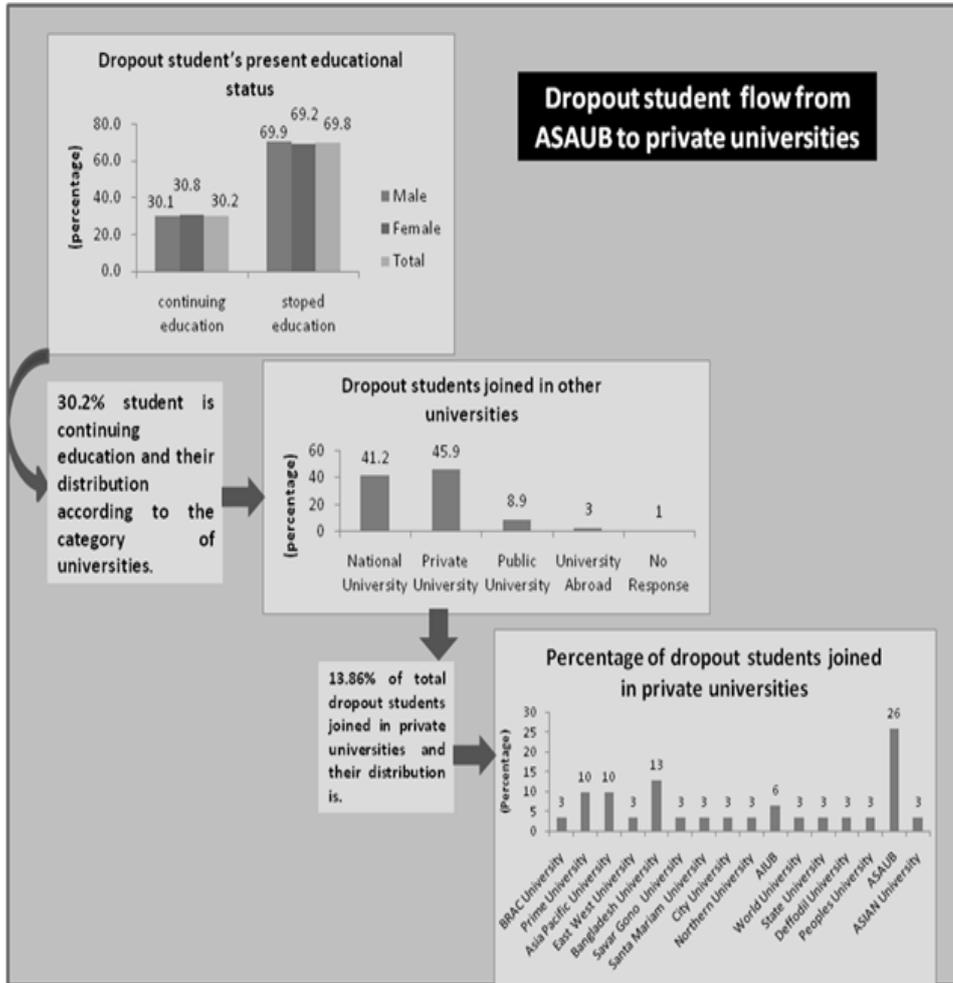
On the other hand, approximately 38% respondents didn't mention exact reasons for their falling out of studies, so they are categorized under the level "no response". All other family problems are showing very low percentage in the graph.



**Fig. 8.** Family related reasons of dropouts from university

#### *Changing University as a Reason for the Dropouts*

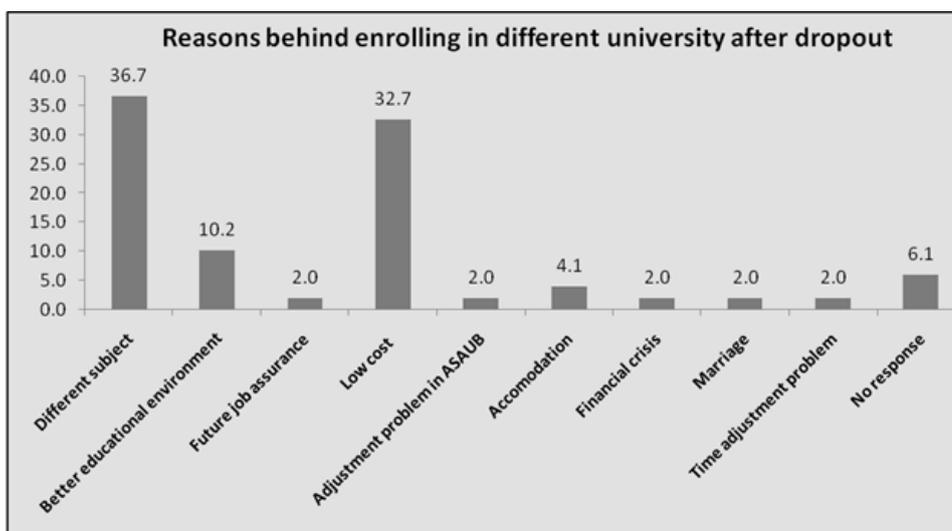
After being dropped out, maximum students are not continuing their education. About 70% of the total dropouts of ASAUB is also not continuing their education and only about 30% is continuing their education. The students who are continuing their education are mostly getting admitted in National University (41.2%), Private Universities (45.9%) and Public Universities (8.9%). National university and public universities have very low educational costs. So it is reasonable that students who will get chance to admit these universities they will go there. But still 45.9% students are joining the private universities and that is 13.86% of the total dropout students. Hence, it is also important to identify that in which private universities they are joining. This study shows that 26% of the students who are getting their admission in other private universities are coming back to ASAUB again to complete their degree. Other than ASAUB, students are also getting admitted in many other private universities. This discussion will be clear from the graphical presentation below:



**Fig. 9.** Distribution and flow of students continuing their studies (after dropping out of ASAUB)

While analyzing the causes of shifting universities we found some reasons. Here the reasons occupy the major share of percentage (about 78.6%) and the major reasons include to study in different subjects, better educational environment, and low educational cost (Figure 9). Other minor causes are marriage, time adjustment problem, accommodation problem, future job assurance, etc.

In the following graph we can see that different discipline, better environment, low cost, accommodation etc. are the main causes behind the dropping out of the students from ASAUB for shifting to another university. Choice of different disciplines and costs are the two main factors and these two covers almost 70% of total responses in the following graph (figure 10).



**Fig. 10.** Reasons behind getting enrolled in different universities.

In the above graph, we get that almost 33% students shift to a new university for the facility of low educational cost. In national and public universities, this cost is very low. But the question arises that whether the cost of other private universities is lower or higher than ASAUB. This study has already revealed that Bangladesh University, University of Asia Pacific and Prime University are the major universities where the dropouts of ASAUB are shifting. For this reason, we try to compare the cost of these universities in the following table. The table shows that University of Asia Pacific offers higher cost in all subjects than ASAUB. But the cost in Bangladesh University and Prime University is lower than ASAUB.

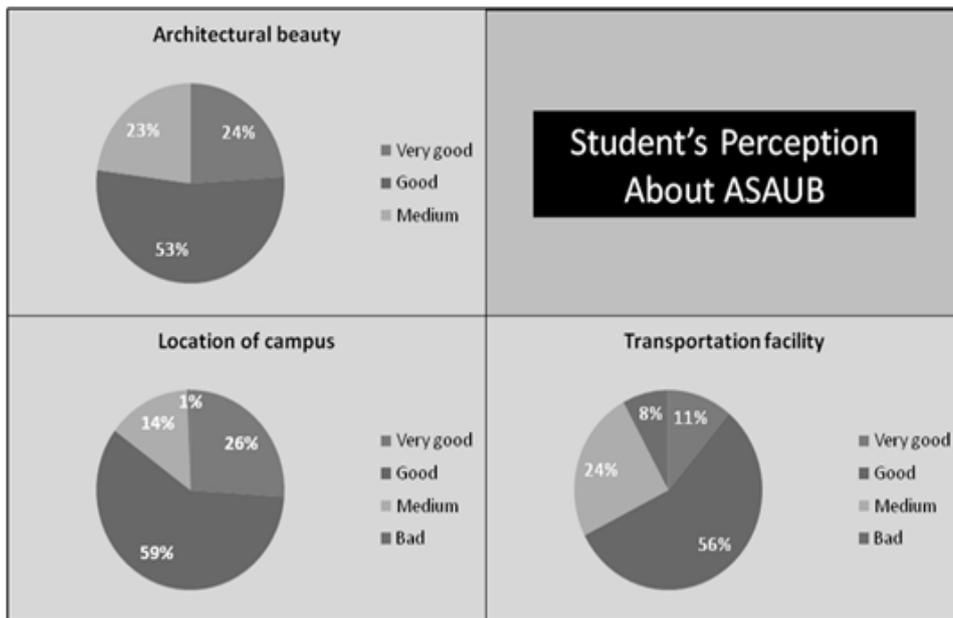
**Table 1.** Cost comparison among private universities

All figures are in BDT				
Subject	Prime	Asia Pacific	BU	ASAUB
BBA	252,600	506,000	350,000	475,800
MBA	126,000	282,000	125,000	For business background: 130,000 For other background: 200,500
LLB	221,800	474,000	260,000	337,000
BA (English)	196,200	346,000	180,000	281,000

#### *Other Causes behind the Dropouts*

From the survey, the researcher has also found some minor causes as well as some perceptions about the ASAUB. Among them, architectural beauty, location of campus, transportation facilities, and health hazard issues are involved. Most of these issues are strong side of ASAUB.

Among the dropouts of ASAUB, 24% finds it has a very good architectural beauty. Only 23% ranked the architectural design in medium category. From the survey the scenario is very clear that to most of the dropouts the location of the campus is not a problem. Very negligible percentage of students (1%) said that the location is not favorable to them. Just 8% of the surveyed dropouts expressed their perception that the transportation facilities are not good enough for them. The majority (56%) of the dropouts is satisfied with the facilities as it is good to them (Figure 11). All these three issues from the following figure prove that perceptions of the students about ASAUB are overall good.



**Fig. 11.** Perception of students about ASAUB

*Summary of Findings*

The Department of Business Administration has the highest dropout rates in comparison with the other departments at ASAUB. Students coming from different educational backgrounds get enrolled in this department hoping to get a job as a basic requirement of the corporate world and find that they cannot cope with the course demand.

Female students in Bangladesh are often enrolled at University by their families not because they expect a good education a good job but just to get married off while still a student. This could be a major reason for female students having a higher dropout rate than that of the male students. Female students found it more difficult to adjust with the university environment compared to their male counterparts. This may be due to the fact that the women in Bangladesh especially coming from the rural areas are conservative and interact little and usually stay within a confinement.

Significant number of students discover that they cannot cope with the study load due to rigorous rules and regulations in examinations and the maintenance of international standard in educational institutions, so less than one tenth of the number of students drop out for academic reasons. While tuition fees at ASAUB are perceived to be relatively low by students, focus group discussion stated that students and guardians expected education services like counseling, job internship and placement.

It has been noted that 30 percent of the drop out students' later return to studies mostly targeting public universities and 46 percent of these returning students select private universities. But only one fifth of the returning students come back to ASA University Bangladesh. Those selecting other universities have shown pursuing degrees from different disciplines, low cost and better environment as major causes for their choices.

While 8 percent student reporting transportation problems to be one of the reasons why they decided to drop out of the university.

While around 47 percent of the dropped-out students discontinue their studies because of financial reasons almost none of them reported the tuition fees to be too high. This implies that while the tuition fees appear to be acceptable to the students and their families, in many cases they find themselves in financial constraints due to factors external factors. Here once again, the female students have been found to be less burdened with financial problems compared to their male counterparts most likely due to traditionally in Bangladesh families expect male members to take greater financial roles rather than female members.

Major family-related reasons for female students dropping out of class are getting married or giving birth to a child. The management may consider providing guidance through student counselling. While there is little to do about the decisions taken by the families of the students, it may be hoped that influencing the students to take well-thought decisions regarding marriage and child birth may have significant positive impact on their education and their future life.

### **Conclusion**

Most students coming from rural areas are disillusioned with the fact that Business Administration degree is a pre-requisite for ensuring a job. The department should provide aptitude tests and interviews to clarify the demand of the subject and to ensure that the students have the capability to ensure good grades and complete the course. There should be orientations and sessions which focus on performance and university expectations from students.

English language both speaking and writing should be provided to weaker students through foundation courses or ASAUB language club. A good command in English will give a competitive edge in the job market.

Students and guardians have expectations that the university could provide services such as job fair, Internship and job placement and career counseling and on campus jobs on the basis of need and merit for ASAUB students. Corporate icons could be invited for seminars and workshop, job fairs and corporate dinner- which would support the networking link between ASAUB and corporate world. Guest teachers could be invited from corporate institutions especially for MBA classes.

A university should have a psychiatrist and a social worker/counselor to advise the changing needs from teenagers to young adolescence. Teachers can play a vital role here to advise not only study problems but counseling personal problems too.

Many students feel the pressure of studies – results fall and students drop out. This issue can be helped by increase counseling hours-by teachers. Diversity of students get admitted to the university- all teachers should give a need analysis assessment in the first class and then revise their course material to fit the level of their students. Students could participate in curricular activities like inter- debating competitions, Model United Nations (MUN) and cultural activities. This would enhance the activities and interest of young students and motivate the interest of the students.

If there is a University Bus- this may act as an advertisement as well as a means of transport for students- a small fee may be taken to run fuel costs every semester. Hostel accommodation would also encourage student intake.

Students dropout and get admitted in other universities due to low cost, better environment and pursuing alternative disciplines. ASAUB is relatively cheap compared to other universities. The university may consider offering diverse course to cater the market demand such as B.Sc. in Electrical and Electronics Engineering, B.Sc. in Electrical and Telecommunication Engineering, and B.Sc. in Computer Science and Engineering, MDS and MSS in Applied Sociology and BSS and MSS in Journalism and Mass Communication.

Branding the University/ increasing the awareness of the university will increase brand loyalty towards the university. This can be achieved through bill boards, print media, online advertisement and curricular activities.

The Broad scale of positioning of universities Fig.6 indicates that slightly reducing the fee structure of the Department of Business will increase the number of intake of students with the support of advertisement and increase of special waiver and a good selection of motivated faculty members- ASAUB over a period of three years may be reposition itself in the market.

Women empowerment is an important issue to our society- through education we would be able to contribute to the progress of society. ASAUB has an obligation towards young women- this includes special waivers for pregnant women. Young female students should

be encouraged to finish their education and a special follow up committee whose function include counseling, follow up of students who have recently been through child birth or marriage.

There is no denying that student dropout rates are a major social and economic problem in Bangladesh. This report indicates that it is clear that the dropout rate at tertiary level is at a serious point in the country. Students' leaving without graduation is costly not only for the individual, the institution but also for society at large. The findings indicate the different reasons for the dropouts at tertiary level such as financial, job related, family issues and shifting to other universities.

The above recommendations may be short termed objectives and long term objectives and with the support of Institutional Quality assurance cell ( IQAC) initiated by UGC to improve the quality of higher education – the above recommendations may increase the enrollment rate, retain dropouts at ASAUB and attract more qualified students.

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