

Facing COVID-19 Pandemic: AIUB Strategy

Mohammad Rafiqul Islam Talukdar, American International University-Bangladesh (AIUB)

Rezbin Nahar, American International University-Bangladesh (AIUB)

Farheen Hassan, American International University-Bangladesh (AIUB)

ABSTRACT

Higher education institutions seem to be a potential-risk site for the outbreak of novel-corona-virus as students used to behave in close community proximity in college and university grounds in Bangladesh and elsewhere in the world. In such a context, the emergence of a new business strategy for the higher education sector to get survived becomes a must. While it seems that many higher education institutions in Bangladesh have failed to respond timely to the call for the emergence of a new business strategy or a new business model to encounter the COVID-19 pandemic situation, American International University-Bangladesh (AIUB) has proved its strength and become a role model as the first university in Bangladesh by shifting with a strategic drive within days of the initial COVID-19 outbreak in the country. AIUB's experience in encountering the COVID-19 pandemic has been documented here as a successful business teaching case. The lead case question: What are the factors that make it successful to encounter a high-sensitive global pandemic situation?

Keywords: AIUB, Business Model, COVID-19, New Business Strategy, Teaching-Case.

INTRODUCTION

American International University-Bangladesh (AIUB) is a government-approved private university in Bangladesh, founded in 1994. The university, an independent higher education institution or organization, is governed by its Board of Trustees in compliance with rules and regulations of the University Grants Commission (UGC) of Bangladesh and the Education Ministry of the Government of Bangladesh. The total number of graduates until now is 29313 (AIUB, 2020). AIUB's agile leadership, new business strategy, and strategic business model in overcoming COVID-19 pandemic challenges seem to be central to this business case. The case observation period was December 2019-December 2020, while the study execution period was October 2020-January 2021. Dr. Carmen Z. Lamagna, the Vice-Chancellor of the University, was vigilant of the global situation on COVID-19 since it was first detected in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. Within few days of the World Health Organization (WHO)'s declaration of COVID-19 as a global pandemic on 11 March 2020, Dr. Lamagna opined in The Daily Star that "this evolving situation will not only be vastly disruptive but also a paradigm shift in higher education institutions" (Lamagna, 2020). She put a motto for the academic community of AIUB that "Socially distanced, intellectually engaged."

Organizational Context

Vision of AIUB

“AMERICAN INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY-BANGLADESH (AIUB) envisions promoting professionals and excellent leadership catering to the technological progress and development needs of the country” (AIUB, 2020).

Mission of AIUB

“AMERICAN INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY-BANGLADESH (AIUB) is committed to providing quality and excellent computer-based academic programs responsive to the emerging challenges of the time. It is dedicated to nurture and produce competent world-class professionals imbued with a strong sense of ethical values ready to face the competitive world of arts, business, science, social science and technology” (AIUB, 2020).

Goals and Quality Policy of AIUB

Exhibit 1 shows the goals of AIUB, while a brief-synthesized quality policy of AIUB is documented here. Quality of services and products of American International University-Bangladesh (AIUB) including those provided by the professional bodies and organizations associated with AIUB shall be adhered to in conformity with the prescribed national and international standards of quality and excellence. The American International University-Bangladesh (AIUB) is committed to translating the programs, projects, and activities into actions related to the sustainable delivery of quality management operation system. The students being the valued customers are the central focus of the university and shall be provided with utmost care and attention to meet their primordial needs and future career success. Given this commitment, the university shall exert its best efforts to harmonize its actions through collaboration, cooperation, and consultation with all units and components of the university (AIUB, 2020a).

COVID-19 Pandemic

No one predicted such type of disruption of the world that fundamentally changed the world dynamics, and its working conditions and forces. Life and livelihood became a tradeoff for most of the people in the world. Higher education institutions seemed to be a high-risk site for the spread of the novel coronavirus considering the communal and cultural interactions of the students in college and university campuses in Bangladesh and elsewhere.

Seemingly, the rise of a new business strategy or model for the higher education sector became inevitable. Only a few institutional leaders in the globe and Bangladesh realized at the early stage that the situation was not as simple as had thought and it might have become prolonged. Dr. Carmen Z. Lamagna, the Vice-Chancellor of AIUB was one of them, and she was proactive, agile, and ready to shape the new business model as well as strategy to encounter the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, at the onset of the World Health Organization (WHO)'s declaration of COVID-19 as a global pandemic in early March 2020, Dr. Lamagna made faculty and staff members cautious and took health-safety precautionary measures in the AIUB.

Different countries experienced and faced the COVID-19 pandemic differently. In the case of Bangladesh, many higher education institutions, especially public universities faced tough experiences to respond timely to the call for the emergence of a new business strategy or strategic business model to encounter the COVID-19 pandemic situation. In this connection, Dr. Lamagna opined that "this evolving situation will not only be vastly disruptive but also a

paradigm shift in higher education institutions” (Lamagna, 2020).

At the onset of the closed down of the education institutions in Bangladesh in mid-March 2020, not all universities were able to go virtual, even many of them did not try to develop a new business strategy or to adopt a new generic business model for higher education institutions. Dr. Lamagna had an option to make AIUB virtual immediately after the shutdown of the education institutions by the Government of Bangladesh to continue the spring 2019-20 Semester or to observe the situation for few days with the incomplete semester. She took a challenging decision. On the day the Government of Bangladesh announced the shutdown of the education institutions, she called-for a faculty meeting followed by a dry run to go virtual.

Table 1. AIUB NEW STRATEGIC-BUSINESS-MODEL FOR COVID-19 PANDEMIC Source: adapted from Talukdar, 2021(a)	
Customer Value Proposition	Value Chain
Safeguard the graduate and undergraduate students from suffering the loss of their semesters.	Enable a digitized interactive as well as versatile set-up and live-online learning environment. Involve students with peer groups and teaching-learning community. Engage faculty members and students with webinar platforms, knowledge hubs, and research networks.
Profit formula	Competitive strategy
Offer reduced and affordable semester-wise tuition fees. Focus on the cost-management through increased operational efficiencies and by limiting back-office functions and rearranging online support. Streamline a live-online quality pedagogical environment to keep exiting students, and pursue to reach more new students without incurring additional costs of facilities, curriculum, and faculty. Avoid or limit part-time faculties.	Use Microsoft Teams Application that holds some competitive advantage over others – e.g. Zoom or Google Meeting, for its technological advancement. Agree with a mobile operating company to support students with economy internet data-pack.

From the next day, under the leadership of Dr. Lamagna, American International University-Bangladesh (AIUB) successfully shifted almost all of its graduate and undergraduate classes online. It included all four faculties – i.e., Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences, Faculty of Business Administration, Faculty of Engineering, and Faculty of Science & Technology – of the university, through enabling faculty members and students to conduct and undertake their classes using the most safeguarded and advanced versatile technological platform Microsoft TEAMS application.

Keeping Dr. Lamagna’s predictability about the uncertainty of the situation and likely long durability of the pandemic, her team developed a new strategic business model, a synthesized version of which, this case-write-up documented in Table 1.

On the onset of the closed-down of universities in Bangladesh in the mid of the spring 2019-20 Semester, AIUB introduced the new strategic business model for overcoming the challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Lamagna (2020):

"Approximately 10,000 active student users along with around 650 faculty members of AIUB are accessing this online platform, utilizing it to its full capacity for online class lectures and team-based work projects. Faculty members are delivering lectures through video

conferencing with embedded PowerPoint presentations, whiteboard incorporations, and desktop sharing options. Students can communicate with them through video, audio, or message boards for queries, clarifications, and class participation, as required and appropriate. They can also participate in the quizzes and assignments through this platform. Several online meetings with the academic and administrative-support staffs are held regularly."

In due course, AIUB became the frontrunner and market champion in this journey. With regards to this, Talukdar (2021a) revealed the facts that:

"While AIUB finished the online classes of the spring semester in 2020 on time, the University Grants Commission (UGC) of Bangladesh did not allow it to make the final assessment until the UGC made a new policy framework, and enabled standards and regulatory environment for higher education institutions in Bangladesh in sustaining the aspects of the new model evolved. Following the AIUB, some other leading private universities started the journey to go online and adapted the new strategic business model-frame with a little tailor-made approach. Almost all private universities in Bangladesh shifted online from the beginning of the summer semester in 2020. But the public universities in Bangladesh remained behind until mid of the summer semester in late August 2020. Since then they gradually started to run online classes, and still many of them are in the dry run stage." Talukdar (2021a) furthermore observed that:

"Unlike private universities, the public universities in Bangladesh do not seem to be fully concerned with the emergent strategic-business model-frame. The reason behind it seems that they neither need to be concerned about the profit formula or revenue generation nor any necessity to think much to create a competitive advantage. They get sufficient funding support from the Government even during the pandemic situation. Eventually, they are neither contingency plan focused nor agile management centric."

Challenges Faced by AIUB

At the beginning of the 21st century, countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, China, and India introduced an online learning platform named Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC). The total number of MOOCs launched by the end of 2019 is 13,500, excluding those of Chinese. Almost 110 million learners enrolled in those courses (Shah, 2019). Unfortunately, Bangladesh stayed far from this league; for Bangladesh, it was not like offering MOOCs. It seemed all about moving courses from the traditional system to live-online for a certain period. Even though the Government of Bangladesh had announced the full development of digital Bangladesh by 2021, it was not focusing on digitalizing its education system to a great extent.

Nonetheless, one of the main objectives of Digital Bangladesh seemed to make "the best use of emerging technology to develop world-class skills in all areas of studies" (Mazumdar & Alharahsheh, 2020). Due to COVID-19, instead of closing all operations, private universities tried to serve their students using an online platform. AIUB, one of the forerunners of online education at private universities in Bangladesh, offered online classes through the Microsoft TEAMS Application for its all four faculties for both undergraduate and graduate programs to ensure regular teaching operations where both students and faculty members stayed at home.

To transfer all the current courses online with short notice seemed a huge and radical transition. Normally it might have required an extensive lesson plan design, teaching resources development, teacher's training, and also technical support team's readiness to systematically launch a fully online course. But AIUB's proactive management team under the agile leadership of Dr. Lamagna, having registered membership of Microsoft TEAMS, organized a dry run session before the lockdown of the Dhaka city. The dry run session was successful and the online class began on 20 March 2020 for both undergraduate and graduate programs to ensure the safety of the students, teachers, administrators, and general staff members of the university.

Having the contriving nature, AIUB ensured the safety of its faculty and staff members in addition to the students as everyone continued operating their responsibilities from home during the outbreak of COVID-19. It seemed to be a challenge for many Bangladeshi private and public universities. But AIUB overcame the obstacle as it had an affiliation with Microsoft live.edu since 2008, and was officially branded as Microsoft 365, to gain unlimited user access to the voluminous of its applications, along with Microsoft Teams.

Microsoft Teams appeared to be a centralized forum for connectivity and collaboration that used to integrate continuous workplace chat, video meetings, file storage, and device integration. AIUB, the first university in Bangladesh, took the challenge to run virtually within few days of the country's initial corona-virus outbreak. Eventually, it was accustomed to complete virtual classes with its MS Teams Application. Students and faculty members got used to having access by their university email IDs.

To transmit all data required for MS Teams to make online classes operational and to facilitate the entire techno process, AIUB had a strong techno-structure under the leadership of Dr. Lamagna (see Exhibit 2 for understanding the techno-structure position in an organization). The aforementioned technical system or the platform was termed as the "Security Management System." The platform allowed an emergent and flexible set-up as an alternative medium to traditional in-class teaching and learning environments, leading to shape an advanced digital education system in today's world. The initiative made the students positively engaged during the prolonged COVID-19 pandemic and safeguarded their semesters, as well as provided them and their parents a sense of security.

AIUB'S Strategic Thrusts

Empowering leaders used to provide reasonable freedom to the team players to practice due diligence to heighten the team autonomy (Srivastava, et al., 2006). Different studies disclosed that both an educational institution and its leadership culture seemed to be perceived by its vision-mission, norms, values, rules, and attitudes, and essentially how the institution was accustomed to performing its portfolio (Deal and Peterson, 1999; Fullan, 2001).

AIUB's senior management under the leadership of Dr. Lamagna from the very beginning used to follow the top-down approach where they accustomed to empower the deans, directors, heads to achieve the concerned portfolio goals. Since the top-down approach took place, AIUB leaders used to decide objectives, initiatives, programs, and projects, and assign portfolios and tasks to mid-management to perform independently. Mid-level management then used to communicate such goals, programs, and activities to their immediate teams like directors, heads of various departments.

AIUB's instructional strategy focused to continue students' learning by a smooth

transition to online during the Covid-19 outbreak (see Exhibit 3). One of the pressing challenges was how to maintain quality education that could have enhanced student learning while using the online platform? To ensure quality online education, AIUB Quality Assurance Cell, under the leadership of Vice-Chancellor of AIUB - Dr. Lamagna, introduced a range of instructional strategies that helped improve student learning and build commitment to achieve a smooth transition to online education. It seemed that lab-oriented classes were not feasible. So, AIUB offered only theoretical courses to students.

Segregation of teaching materials helped students concentrate easily on learning. Within a week of starting the online classes, instructions were sent to each faculty member following a short meeting *via* emails to maintain the performance of students. Also, the management teams used to monitor the class management, while faculty members were accustomed to reviewing the progress of each class lesson based on the syllabus along with the task and assignments provided to students.

The market climate seemed to be full of extremely rapid change, technology appeared to be evolving, competition and competitive advantage landscape always used to evident even in such a critical situation, and clients used to demand better quality. An organization’s needed to be responsive to those changes to achieve its overarching objectives. Efficiency concern was required to deal with the overall strategy of the organization. The challenge seemed here how to improve the overall quality control of the organization.

Under the motto “Socially distanced, intellectually engaged” proposed by the Vice-Chancellor of the University - Dr. Lamagna, AIUB organized series of collaborative webinars for faculty members' knowledge building and sharing. AIUB also hosted several online training sessions for faculty members’ course-curriculum and research capacity development. Moreover, American International University-Bangladesh’s Institutional Quality Assurance Cell (AIUB-IQAC) facilitated Faculty Development Program (FDF) on Outcome-Based Education (OBE). Besides, AIUB continued to organize different career-oriented programs focusing on different skills and competencies. AIUB also continued to concentrate on career and skills development workshops for students through its various clubs. Finally, Table 2 below exposed key strategic thrusts of AIUB during the Covid-19 pandemic:

Table 2 KEY STRATEGIC THRUSTS OF AIUB DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC
ST1: Add value by offering quality education to the development of human capital.
ST2: Come up with providing leadership to continue different academic and non-academic activities.
ST3: Organize series of the online-research training session for faculty development to contribute to academia.
ST4: Organize several training sessions for Faculty Development Program (FDP) on Outcome-Based Education (OBE).
ST5: Continue to work to maintain an image and branding that meets the requirements of stakeholders.
ST6: Arrange various workshops for career growth and skill enhancement to demonstrate different skills needed to get and secure jobs.

The new strategic business model as well as business strategy, and evolving critical experiences of AIUB might have created post-pandemic opportunities with a sustained competitive advantage in continuing with the new strategic business model alongside its traditional business model.

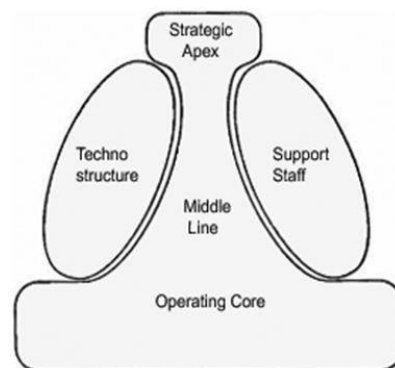
Discussion Questions

1. To what extent do you agree with Dr. Carmen Z. Lamagna's decision to go virtual within a day of the government announcement for the shutdown of the education institutions in Bangladesh? Justify your opinion.
2. If you were the Vice-Chancellor of the University, how did you make a SWOT analysis on COVID-19 pandemic context to frame the new business strategy and strategic model?
3. What factors and strategies made the AIUB leader Dr. Lamagna successful in building a positive organizational atmosphere in such a distressing situation? And what were the AIUB's competitive advantages in shaping the new strategic business model?
4. Considering the new strategic business model as well as business strategy, and evolving critical experiences of AIUB, what could be its post-pandemic opportunities with sustained competitive advantages?
5. Could you please provide some explicit suggestions concerning the application of this AIUB Business Model with other education institutions both within and outside Bangladesh in facing such a global pandemic situation?

EXHIBIT 1

Goals of AIUB

- Sustain development and progress of the university.
- Continue to upgrade educational services and facilities responsive to the demands for change and needs of the society.
- Inculcate professional culture among management, faculty, and personnel in the attainment of the institution's vision, mission, and goals.
- Enhance research consciousness in discovering new dimensions for curriculum development and enrichment.
- Implement meaningful and relevant community outreach programs reflective of the available resources and expertise of the university.
- Establish strong networking of programs, sharing of resources and expertise with local and international educational institutions and organizations.
- Accelerate the participation of alumni, students, and professionals in the implementation of educational programs and development of projects designed to expand and improve global academic standards.

EXHIBIT 2**FIGURE 1**

THE FIVE BASIC PARTS OF THE ORGANIZATION
SOURCE: MINTZBERG, 1980: 324

EXHIBIT 3**The instructional strategy of AIUB**

1. Made emergency preparedness arrangements for unexpected situations; segregated the learning material into smaller units to help students focus as they were first doing online classes; Faculty members were encouraged and instructed to use different approaches to moderately alter the activities, classwork, and reading expectations of students to improve the successful participation of students in the class; an efficient combination of online learning and offline self-learning.
2. Students were expected to read the course-specific literature in the offline self-learning process and submit a summary based on their reading of key materials. The faculty should have provided input on the activities of students and considered the cognitive learning levels of students. For students to exchange their observations based on their listening and reading, the faculty could have used a discussion section in the online classroom environment.

INSTRUCTOR'S MANUAL**Learning Objectives**

First, to inform readers about the emergent strategy and strategic business model of American International University-Bangladesh (AIUB) to encounter the COVID-19 pandemic; Second, to

illustrate the practical challenges AIUB faced given this pandemic context and its strategic approach; Third, to allow students to analyze the context and leadership decision to a paradigm shift of AIUB as a result of the likely prolonged novel-corona-virus pandemic.

Theoretical Frame

Theoretical base of this case seemed to be open system organizational theories. According to Scott (1992: 89), "the best way to organize depends on the nature of the environment to which the organization relates." Talukdar (2021) opined that "an organization as an open system constantly exchanges feedbacks with its internal and external environments and analyzes those feedbacks to adjust to the internal system to achieve its system goals."

Study Method

The case writing employed the qualitative case study method that included a couple of data collection techniques: Participant observations, and literature review.

Relevant Teaching Courses

Undergraduate level courses - Management, and Operations Management; Graduate level courses - Strategic Management, Crisis Management, and Leadership and Management in Organizations.

How to Analyze the Case

Figure 2 below portrays a complete methodological outlook to analyze this teaching case.

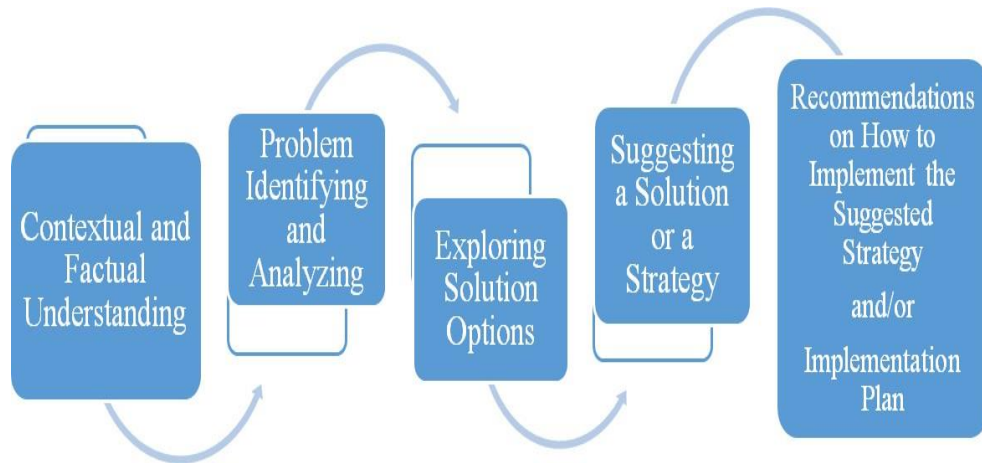


FIGURE 2

CASE STUDY ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK

SOURCE: ADAPTED FROM TALUKDAR, 2020, TALUKDAR, 2020(A)

Talukdar (2020) has made a splendid analysis of Figure 2 that is documented in below.

Analysis of the Case Study Analysis Framework

The case analysis starts with understanding the case entity, context, and facts, which requires reading the case a couple of times. Once the context and facts are clearly understood, the case analyst carefully identifies the problem area of the case and makes a diagnosis to point out the problem exactly, followed by a systematic analysis of the problem. Analysis entails revealing the magnitude, dimensions, consequences, and causal relation of the problem. If the problem is correctly diagnosed and analyzed, the case analysis is half done. The case analyst at this stage focuses on exploring solutions options. It is a critical part of the case analysis. It requires knowledge of strategic management. It explores multiple solution strategies considering the strategic planning process. Each of the solutions or alternative strategies follows a systematic process of triangulation of internal and external influential aspects of the case entity concerning the diagnosed problem. In other words, each of the solution options goes through internal Strengths & Weaknesses (SW) and external Opportunities & Threats (OT) analysis, termed as Strengths & Weaknesses, and Opportunities & Threats (SWOT) analysis.

The case analyst then compares the weighted average scores from the weighted score matrices of SWOT analysis results. Usually, the best solution is one that carries the highest average score (*i.e.*, average positive minus negative scores) in this regard. But this is not always true. There might be other aspects or factors to be considered including the fitness and relevance of the solution to the case entity.

Also, SWOT is just a commonly used example of an assessment and decision criterion by which to judge the different options. Depending on the case and situation, the decision criteria may be different. Thus, the analyst suggests the best fitting solution or strategy for the entity with appropriate justification. Finally, the analyst puts forward recommendations on how to implement the suggested strategy and/or fixes an operational/implementation plan.

REFERENCES

- AIUB (2020). *Vision-mission, information or overview*. American International University-Bangladesh (AIUB).
- AIUB (2020a). *Quality policy, information or overview*. American International University-Bangladesh (AIUB).
- AIUB (2020b). *Goals, information or overview*. American International University-Bangladesh (AIUB).
- Deal, T.E., & Peterson, K.D. (1999). *Shaping school culture: the heart of leadership*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.
- Fullan, M. (2001). *Leading in a culture of change*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.
- Lamagna, C.Z. (2020). A paradigm shift: The case of aiub dhaka: The daily star, April 09, 2020.
- Mazumdar, A., & Alharahsheh, H.H. (2020). Digital bangladesh–vision 2021: What is the Digital bangladesh concept? *South Asian Res J Eng Tech*, 2(1).

- Mintzberg, H. (1980). Structure in 5's: A synthesis of the research on organization design, *Management Science*, 26(3), 322-341.
- Scott, W.R. (1992). *Organizations: Rational, natural, and open systems*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.
- Shah, D. (2019). By the numbers: MOOCs in 2019.
- Srivastava, A., Bartol, K.M., & Locke, E.A. (2006). Empowering leadership in management teams: effects on knowledge sharing, efficacy, and performance. *Academy of Management Journal*, 49(6), 1239-1251.
- Talukdar, M.R.I. (2020). When the case creates a competitive advantage. *Asian Case Research Journal*, 24(1), 97-109.
- Talukdar, M.R.I. (2020a). The case-based pedagogy in business schools: Should it go alone? *AIUB Journal of Business and Economics*, 17(1), 159-176.
- Talukdar, M.R.I. (2021). Uncertain time calls for agile management and adaptation of contingency plan: Lessons from HEIs in Bangladesh, *AIUB Journal of Business and Economics*.
- Talukdar, M.R.I. (2021a). The emergence of new strategic business models for HEIs: Evidence from Bangladesh, *Academy of Entrepreneurship Journal*, 27(2), 1-16.