

Universities' research role

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THE primary goal of higher education in the developing world is to provide students narrowly defined disciplinary training heavily based on rote memorization of facts, figures, principles and theories. Thus it is not surprising that very little research is done in universities in developing countries and much of it is of questionable quality. Unfortunately, Bangladesh is no different than its peers in this respect.

In an earlier age one could excuse this by saying that research is a luxury of the rich, a conceit of countries well endowed in resources, and irrelevant to the ground realities of the developing world. In today's rapidly globalising world, where the knowledge economy is King, where human capital is much more important than physical capital, where innovation is the key to new sources of employment, research is no longer optional. Bangladesh's low research capacity and output is a barrier to rapid growth and development and if not rectified will for ever relegate us to a marginalised, low wage, cheap labor periphery of the global economy.

There are several factors underlying Bangladesh's low research output at the University level including lack of funding, lack of time, lack of peers etc. In my opinion however the driving force is the overall devaluation of research as an academic enterprise.

In much of the developed world and increasingly in some developing countries (e.g. India, China), faculty academic performance is largely evaluated by research output weighted by quality. More importantly there are clear incentives both positive and negative associated with these performance criteria. Thus it is accepted (at least in North America) that prodigious research output will result in fast-track promotions, while failing to reach research productivity criteria will result in slower promotion and eventually job termination.

In Bangladesh however, the norm is that university level academics is primarily about teaching and only very secondarily about research. Faculty positions provide life-long security and promotions are determined essentially by duration of service and are more or less inevitable. Thus unlike the US where a Larry

Summer (the past president of Harvard University and former treasury secretary) can become a full professor of Economics at Harvard at the age of 28 without any teaching experience, in Bangladesh a brilliant young faculty member will have to wait her time (and a long time it will be) before moving up the ranks. Conversely even very mediocre research performance will not stop a faculty member from eventually moving up the ranks.

Aside from the inefficiency of a system of promotion heavily influenced by civil service notions of duration of service, research evaluation criteria in Bangladesh (as in many developing countries) are also sub-optimal. While there are clear guidelines about the quantity of research output (i.e. the number of papers/monographs published/submitted) required for promotion almost no attention is placed on quality. In Bangladesh most research related promotion criteria are satisfied by publishing in local in-house journals of questionable quality. While the assessment of quality even in the developed world is not completely unanimous there is increasing coalescence around the notion of

neutral quality indications such as Impact Factors which take into account the frequency of citation by academic peers. It is worth noting that Bangladeshi journals because of their low peer recognition tend to have very low impact factors.

Research is ultimately about asking questions and basing judgments on evidence rather than accepted wisdom. At the heart of the low status of research in Bangladesh are cultural values typical of traditional societies which emphasise deference to authority and a reluctance to question the status quo. In a country where essays are memorized and independent thinking penalized, creativity can be a problem and students and faculty members from a very early age internalise the importance of conformity.

I am saddened and bemused by how difficult it is to get university students and even faculty members to think independently and question the status quo. "What do YOU think?" is a threatening question and is most often followed by an uncomfortable silence and sometimes by rattling off some half remembered usually completely irrelevant

passage from an outdated textbook. Students are afraid to voice opinions and the only issue of interest to the majority of students is whether the material is in the syllabus and whether they will be tested on it. Faculty members on the other hand are mostly complacent and view their role primarily as providers of training rather than generators of new knowledge.

Bangladeshi university curricula for the most part are long on breadth and short on depth. They tend to heavily emphasize arcane theory with little attention paid to applications or research. I remember when I first started teaching at the University level in Bangladesh in 2003 after many years of being on the faculty of Harvard University I was very impressed by the extensive course curricula and the list of topics to be covered which was much greater than any course I had taught or had been exposed to as an undergraduate or graduate student at Harvard. I soon realized that the courses were obsessed with a superficial coverage of a large number of topics despite the fact that students by and large had no understanding of basic concepts and no exposure to

applications or research concepts. I believe this to be true of most university courses in Bangladesh.

So now that have identified the lack of a culture of research as the major impediment to doing research at the University level in Bangladesh, how does one go about fixing it. This is a complex problem and does not lend itself to simplistic answers. At the heart of the solution is the active recognition by university authorities that research is the primary function of academic faculty and not a fringe activity. This means that faculty members need to understand that without clearly defined and measurable research output, their professional advancement will be hampered. Conversely faculty members meeting or exceeding minimal research criteria will be rewarded by faster promotion, salary increases, institutional recognition etc. Transparent, globally consistent and accepted criteria for evaluation of research activity need to be set up and adhered to.

Some may be skeptical about the possibility of bringing about such fundamental changes in the prevailing academic culture of Bangladesh. I am heartened

by the experience of my own university (Independent University, Bangladesh) where we have made a concerted effort to create a university environment that values research amongst both students and faculty and views it as the centre piece of the academic experience. Our limited experience so far has been quite positive with measurable research output rising after a transparent set of financial and professional incentives were set up (e.g. salary increments; subsidizing international conference participation; faster promotion etc.). There are clearly challenges ahead, the main one being what to do with under-performers, but I am confident that if we try, we can create in Bangladesh a dynamic exciting university research environment where both student and faculty members see themselves as primarily knowledge generators rather than passive recipients and imparters of received wisdom. Frankly we have no other option.

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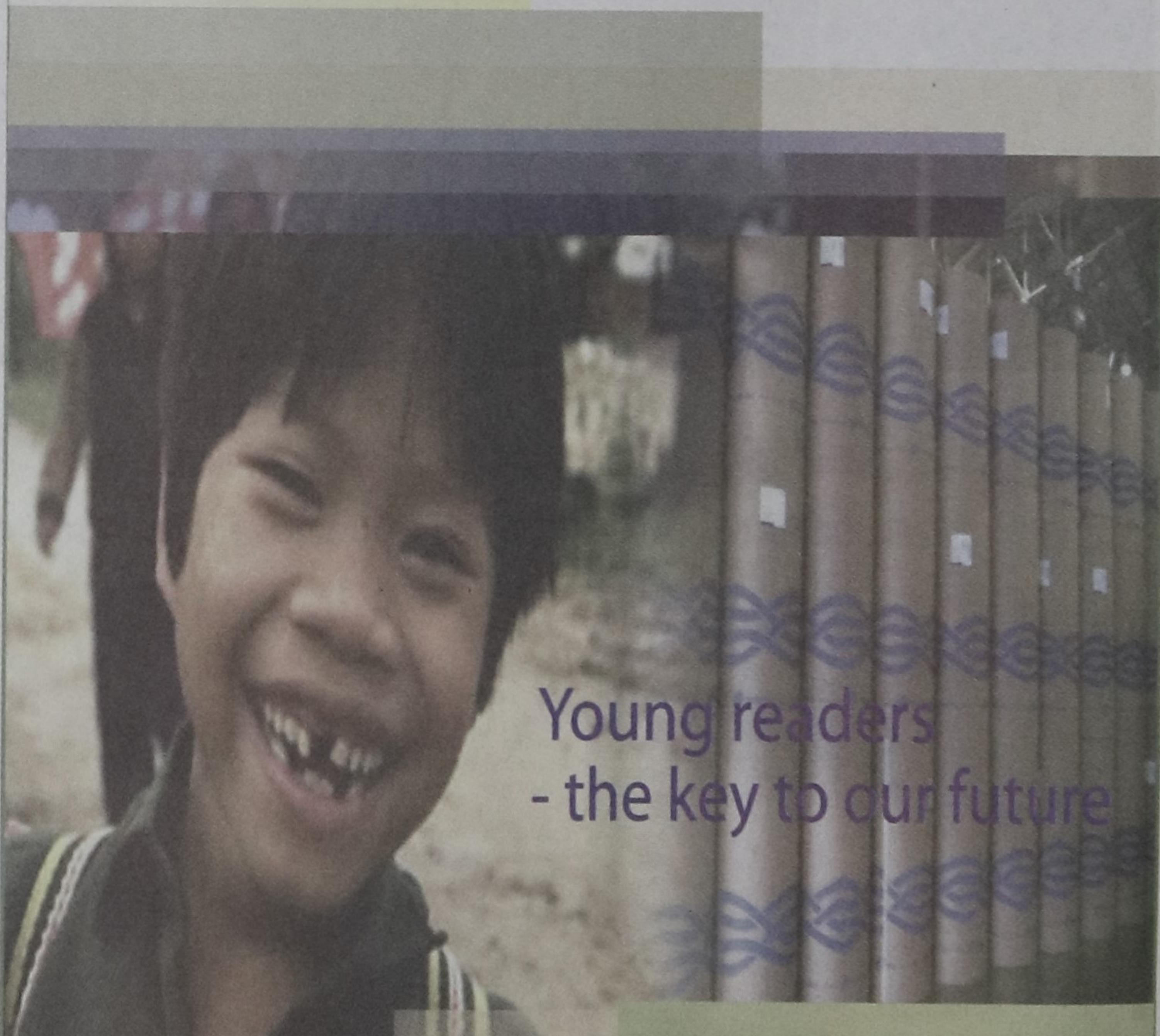


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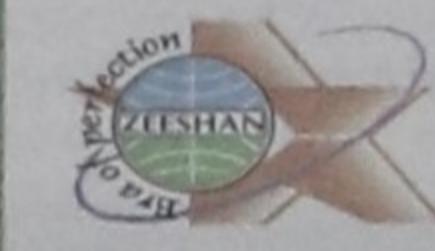
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