

Budget should include cash subsidies to rice farmers

Make up for the injustice done to them

IT has been a disheartening realisation that farmers of our country, despite their back-breaking work in the fields to grow paddy that provides our main staple (rice), have had to bear huge losses as they could not sell their crops at a price that would give them a marginal profit. Instead, paddy prices were so low that they could not even cover their costs. According to reports, a farmer had to spend Tk 24,000 to grow a tonne of paddy and ended up selling it to the millers at only Tk 15,000—incurring a loss of Tk 9,000 for every tonne sold. Meanwhile, the government bought the paddy from the millers at Tk 21,600 at least—giving the millers a Tk 5,850 profit for every tonne.

Now, how is it fair that farmers, the real actors in providing us with food, are being deprived of what is due to them while millers, the middlemen, are gaining profits and that too, through government procurement?

The injustice of it all is far too blatant to ignore, and Centre for Policy Dialogue has rightly proposed a cash subsidy of Tk 5,000 (from the budget) to the country's nearly two crore farmers to offset the losses. It is an expenditure that will somewhat compensate for the hardship these farmers are going through for no fault of their own.

We hardly have to reiterate how crucial the agriculture sector is for the country's development. In simple terms, our farmers are the lifeblood of this country and they should be supported in every way possible. It is painful to see how farmers often pass days of uncertainty because they are not able to get a fair price for their hard-earned crops. Subsidies and other technical support are essential to make sure that farmers can survive and continue to grow the crops that feed the entire country. In the future the government must ensure that farmers get fair prices and help them adopt farming technologies that will bring down production costs and give better yields.

A cancer hospital sitting idle for 12 years!

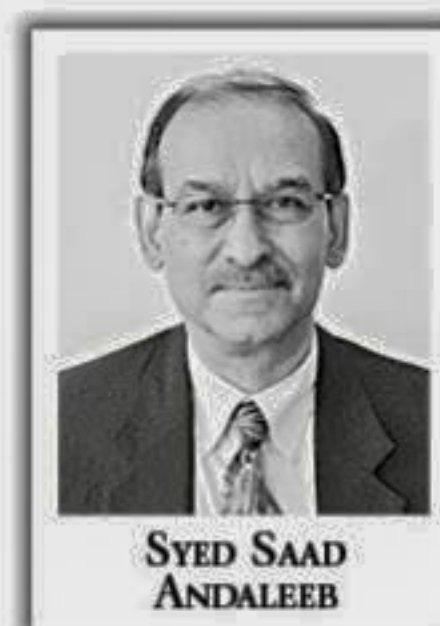
Remove the barriers in making it fully functional

WHILE care facilities for the large number of cancer patients in the country are severely inadequate, Rajshahi Cancer Hospital and Research Centre, the lone cancer care facility in Rajshahi division, is sitting idle with no cancer patients to avail treatment. As this daily reported on June 12, this four-storey specialised hospital has 45 beds which mostly remain empty while all its modern machines remain unused. And according to the hospital records, last year, the hospital treated over 8,000 diabetes patients while only 146 cancer patients were treated there. This is because the hospital does not have adequate number of specialised doctors, oncologists and other staff to provide cancer care to the patients. How can a cancer hospital run with only eight part-time doctors and without any permanent oncologist?

According to the World Health Organization, Bangladesh has more than 15 lakh cancer patients, with about two lakh new cases detected every year. And according to Cancer Awareness Foundation Bangladesh, there are only 37 cancer hospitals in the country. This means that for a large number of people, cancer treatment is still inaccessible.

Amid such a situation, keeping the Rajshahi hospital underutilised means depriving patients who are in desperate need of care. If run properly, this "non-profit" hospital could have made a difference by providing treatment to poor patients at an affordable price. It remains a mystery as to why after 12 years of its completion, the hospital could not hire full-time specialised doctors. Such sheer waste of money and other resources is unacceptable. The hospital authorities should be transparent about how its annual budget is used and follow the guidelines of the government in carrying out their activities. The government should also intervene to make this facility fully functional.

Teaching load: The missing link in higher education quality



SYED SAAD ANDALEEB

ASK faculty members in the country's universities what would motivate them to devote more time to research and you will hear one common answer: decrease present

course loads and class sizes. Both factors continue to weigh heavily on their daily toil and pursuit of excellence.

So, how many courses/sections should faculty members realistically teach in a semester? The question has serious implications for the quality of education delivered to university students, especially in an era where employers constantly complain about the deficiencies of our graduating students, when the rate of joblessness among university graduates is growing, when the number of foreign workers in decision-making positions is increasing, and when our ability to compete in a globalised world is seriously threatened.

In private universities, the typical course/section load is four per semester (roughly 30 percent of teachers have typical loads of five or more), which adds up to 12 classes taught per year. If a class has an average of 30 students (some, I know, have up to 50-plus), each teacher is responsible for approximately 120-200 students per semester—give or take a few. In a typical year, a single faculty member is thus responsible for preparing to teach anywhere between 360-600 students in a particular subject.

How do you train so many minds well? The fact is: you don't! To teach well, it takes serious effort to engage students in active learning, a complex process involving cognitive, emotional, and sensory domains that require higher-order thinking. Many of our teachers are not concerned about this challenge. A lot of them are simply unaware of how adults learn and, therefore, couldn't be bothered about engaging them; others merely process large numbers of students in their classes as efficiently as possible. This means their focus is largely on making students memorise and remember facts, terms, concepts, or answers without necessarily making them understand what they mean. Grading is also easy as it involves a simple count of the facts recounted.

For real learning to take place, each individual learner must be understood in his or her context and taken through various cognitive and related stages. Exemplified by Bloom's taxonomy, the diagram tells us where most of academia's teaching-learning methods are focused: at the bottom of the pyramid where memorisation, recalling, defining and remembering are stressed. The practice of engaging students at higher levels of the learning hierarchy is rare. No wonder Einstein emphasised, "The value of an education in a liberal arts college is not the learning of many facts but the training of the mind to think, something that cannot be learned from textbooks."

Talking to students even in the better

known private universities, it is painfully evident that their higher cognitive skills are hardly being challenged; consequently, their analytical, evaluative and creative skills remain seriously underdeveloped. The price? They are unable to perform well when real life calls upon them to address ambiguity and solve actual problems. I might even recall my own days in college and engineering university where experiments were done by lab assistants; we merely noted the readings and did some formula-based calculations!

Many students have also been attuned to the notion that the purpose of university education is to get a certificate, something many so-called universities are delighted to provide. What the students are learning and the extent to which they are prepared to meet and shape the real world is not their concern.

The truth is that competent, inspiring and informed teachers, trained to

As more universities in Bangladesh are taking cognisance of these developments, stringent research ought to become an imperative. But such research requires time, training and resources—all in short supply.

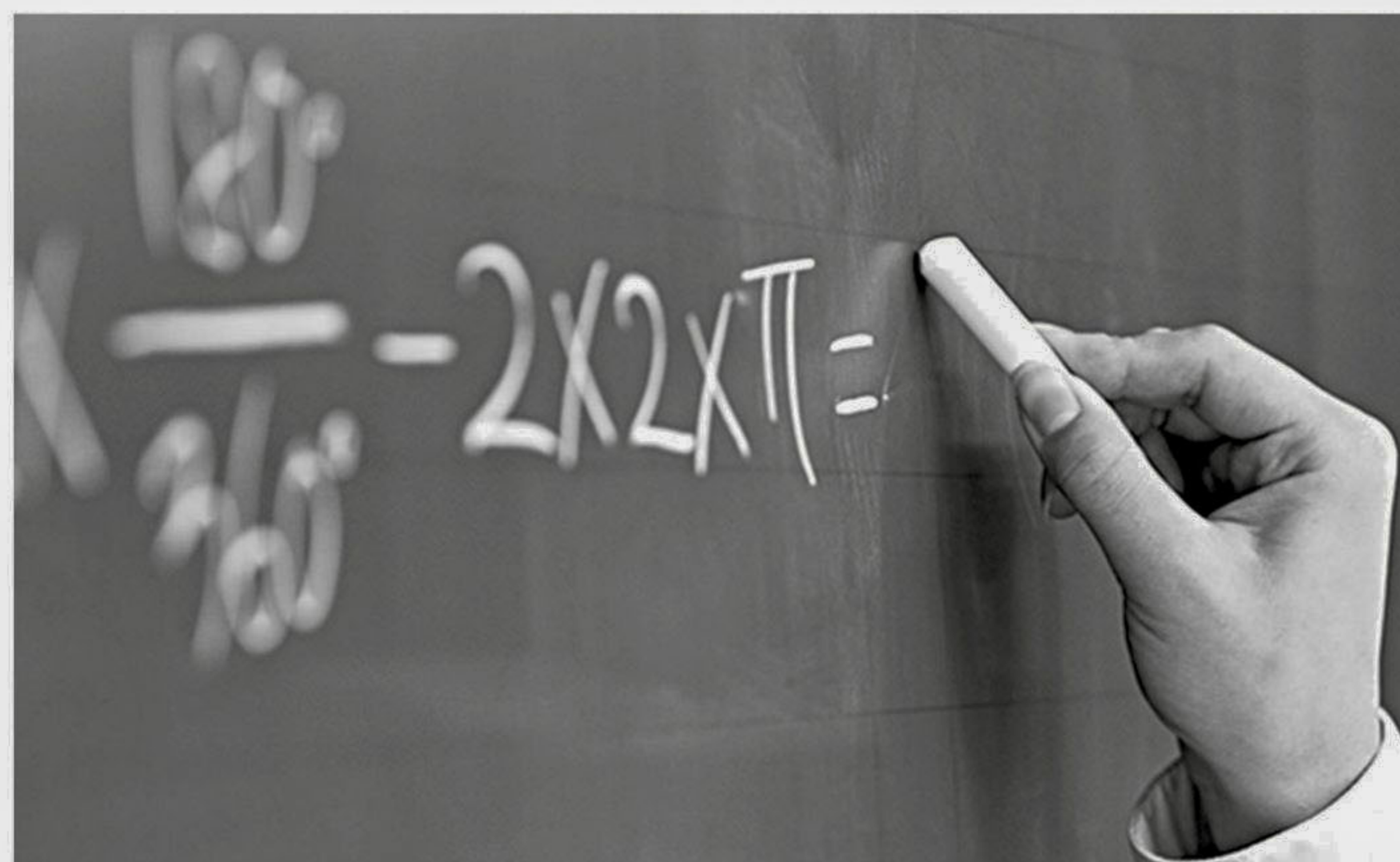
In addition, faculty members are expected to be involved in other institutional activities: coordinating club activities, supervising admission tests, organising various departmental programmes, attending workshops and graduation ceremonies, delivering seminars, advising students, and playing a role in governance (disciplinary committee, recruitment committee, planning committee, research committee, curriculum committee, and many more).

In flesh and bone, with emotions and feelings, as family persons and social beings, and as cultural and spiritual entities, work-life balance is a constant challenge that shadows faculty members.

demand of the faculty.

The cap must be enforced, especially for "teachers" who have made teaching a money-making enterprise by teaching at various institutions. Students dislike the teachers who are only available during the class period, offer no consultations, never explain the grades, and act in student-unfriendly ways. Other teachers are likely to be unhappy with course caps as they seek extra load to make more money. They must realise that there is a tradeoff between the number of courses taught and the quality that can be delivered. Savvy students and their parents, today, must demand higher-order learning, not just a certificate.

From a financial perspective, costs will certainly go up. If the administration is irked or outraged at this suggestion, let them calculate how much money each teacher generates and how much they actually take home. Let them also note that universities are not meant for



SOURCE: DEGREES.FH1360.ORG

facilitate adult learning, can markedly influence student achievement. Teachers such as these, both new and experienced, must be developed to provide professional, problem-solving, and interactive learning opportunities in the classroom and beyond. These teachers must also be in constant training. With current course loads and tonnes of exam scripts and homework to grade, where is the time for such training? Where is the time to engage with students individually, care for them and touch their minds, hearts and souls?

These same faculty members are also expected to do research. In a competitive world, where rankings have become commonplace, academic research must conform to certain standards—publishing in indexed journals (SCOPUS and the like), citation rates, impact factors, H-index, etc. If the research does not meet these standards, it is not valued as such, especially by the ranking agencies.

For lack of alternative opportunities, many remain mute and sullen at their high-load predicament as teachers, some of them bearing it with fortitude and resignation. Others find ways to cut corners. The underlying frustrations and antagonism that many keep suppressed deep in their hearts make teaching load a subject of serious behavioural research.

My personal view is to install a nine-course teaching cap for an academic year as the norm for all teachers, regardless of seniority, and whether they teach within or outside the university. From this base, additional course releases ought to be availed to those who add further value to the university—researchers, grant writers, mentors, department heads, programme organisers, heads of centres and/or institutes, industry relationship developers, intrapreneurs, peer-evaluators and others. At this reduced load level, however, higher-order engagement of students must be

profit; they are there for enlightenment, empowerment, and emancipation.

Good teachers are great nation-builders. They are in short supply. Armed with modern teaching (andragogical) skills, they can be the changemakers of changemakers that this nation needs badly. With the right training, teaching loads and related incentives, not only will it attract much better, competent and creative souls to embrace the teaching profession but will also mean that students will get more attention, think creatively, engage in problem-solving, and will be prepared for an evolving, and possibly volatile, future. The gains for society are likely to be immense.

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'Anchals' save lives

The government should support initiatives that aim to prevent deaths of children by drowning



KELLY LARSON

DROWNING is an under-recognised global public health issue causing an estimated 322,000 deaths each year, with nearly 94 percent of these deaths occurring in low- and middle-income countries.

In Bangladesh, drowning is the leading cause of death for children ages 1-4, with 10,000 children drowning every year. But there is a solution to prevent these unnecessary deaths. Bloomberg Philanthropies has been supporting *anchals* (community daycare centres) across the country since 2012, with 50,000 children currently

enrolled. The benefits of *anchals* are numerous, including protection against drowning but also cognitive and social development. Our hope is the government of Bangladesh will support and scale-up this programme to other regions of the country.

Given the large toll drowning takes on 1-4 year-olds in Bangladesh, Bloomberg Philanthropies launched a drowning prevention study in 2012 to identify cost-effective strategies to prevent drowning among this age group. Partnering with Johns Hopkins University, Bloomberg School of Public Health and local research organisations, Centre for Injury Prevention and Research, Bangladesh (CIPRB) and the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh (icddr), Bloomberg

Philanthropies supported the study in seven sub-districts of Bangladesh: Raiganj, Sherpur Sadar, Manohardi, Matlab North and South, Chandpur Sadar, and Daudkandi.

The study followed 72,000 children ages 1-4 years during 2014-2016, with the goal of measuring the effectiveness of *anchals* to prevent drowning. In *anchals*, a caregiver ("anchal ma") supervises children from 9am to 1pm Monday through Saturday, the timeframe when parents are busy with household chores or other work and children are most vulnerable. It takes only moments to lose sight of a child and 80 percent of drowning among 1-4-year-olds occur 20 metres from the family's front door. The study is pending publication, but preliminary findings show that community *anchals* were effective in preventing drowning among 1-4 year-olds.

Since the conclusion of the study in 2016, more than 50,000 children have continued to be enrolled in Bloomberg Philanthropies-supported *anchals*, with village injury prevention committee providing guidance in communities where *anchals* exist. The demand for *anchals* in Bangladesh continues. When I visited one *anchal* in Manohardi in 2016, members of the village injury prevention committee requested similar support in the neighbouring area where two children had recently drowned.

Anchals save lives, with numerous co-benefits for participating children. Enrolment in *anchals* was found to be associated with higher psychosocial scores demonstrating higher cognitive development among children in this age group. It also showed improved socialisation and problem-solving abilities. The benefits by far exceeded the annual cost of USD 25 per child, demonstrating *anchals'* cost-effectiveness.

One death from drowning is too many; 10,000 deaths are unimaginable, but occur every year in Bangladesh. The government of Bangladesh recognises drowning as a public health issue and we are optimistic they will fund the expansion of this effort to ensure all children aged 1-4 years have access to *anchals*.

Kelly Larson is the director of US-based Bloomberg Philanthropies' injury prevention portfolio, including drowning prevention and road safety. She also directs the Partnership for Healthy Cities. She has worked in public health for 30 years for local, national and international agencies.



PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Is social media addiction a real threat?

Our dependence on mobile phones and other gadgets—especially due to social media—has exceeded the (what some might call) healthy threshold. It is not uncommon to see people of all ages staring at their phones all day while scrolling through their newsfeeds—with the young generation being the most vulnerable to addiction to social media.

A proper medical term for this has not yet been coined but the behaviour associated with its excessive usage and indulgence has generated much debate and research. Social media networking sites have been blamed for behavioural issues like anxiety, depression and attention deficiency. Bangladesh is no exception. As per the Q2 Global Digital Statshot report of 2017, Dhaka stood second in terms of having the most number of active Facebook users.

As long as social media is being used smartly, there is no real threat. But we should be aware of the myriad problems associated with overuse of social media.

Hasan Tasnim Shaon, Dhaka University