

Metro Rail Through DU: At What Cost?



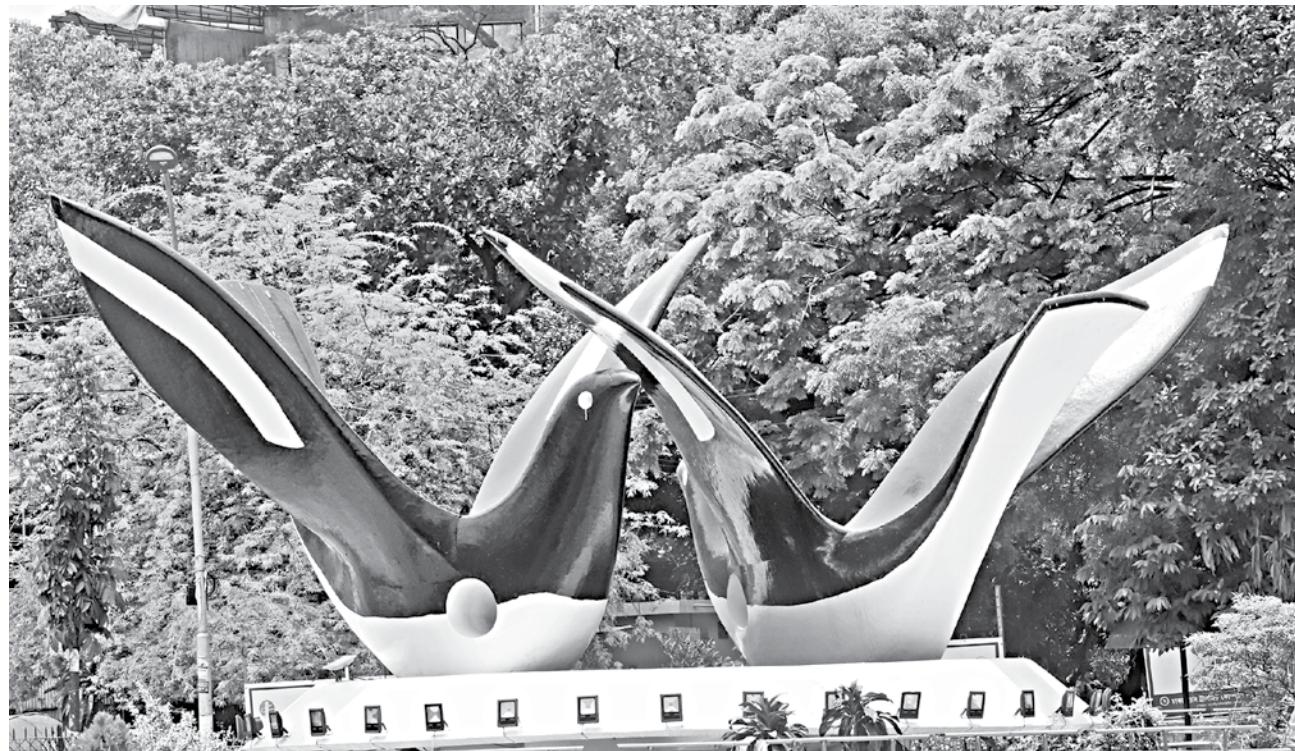
Soon to be shadowed"—read the caption of an image on *The Daily Star*'s front page last week. It featured the iconic Shontresh Birodi Raju

Bhashkarja, and looming over it, the towering structures of Bangladesh's first-ever metro rail, the MRT 6, still under construction. The image brought into focus an issue that has been a point of contention for the students of the University of Dhaka (DU) for four years now.

On the face of it, it might feel like there shouldn't be much to complain about. MRT 6 is a long-awaited project for the people of Dhaka, the beginning of long-term public transport infrastructure which is vital if this city were to remain functional going forward. Public transport that traverses a university should, in theory, help the students who study there by providing them with a fast option of getting in and out of the campus. But there's more to this issue than meets the eye.

The metro rail is being constructed along the edges of a large number of important academic and cultural centres of the university. The current alignment of MRT 6 takes it past the Faculty of Fine Arts, two libraries (Central and Science), research centres in CARS (Centre for Advanced Research in Sciences) and CARASS (Centre for Advanced Research in Arts and Social Sciences), the Atomic Energy Centre, Bangla Academy, the Institute of Nutrition and Food Sciences, Mokarram Bhaban, and Curzon Hall, all of which include critical research labs and of course classrooms.

It's not hard to imagine the disruption that will be caused by trains going past all of these buildings every four minutes. The overall detriment to the academic environment and the inevitable drop in quality of education



File photo of Doyel Chattar on the Dhaka University campus. The metro rail is being constructed along the edges of a number of important academic and cultural centres of the university.

PHOTO: SK. ENAMUL HAQUE

that this will bring is what makes it so hard to get behind this project.

Then there's the "small" problem of the MRT 6 straddling some notable landmarks inside the DU campus. Other than Raju Bhashkarja, Dhaka Gate, a Mughal-era landmark, will find itself placed directly under the viaducts taking the metro from Doyel Chattar towards the High Court area. Tin Netar Mazar and Ramna Kali Mandir will also be within earshot and eyeshot of the rapid trains which are going to produce noise and vibrations, the intensity of which is still unclear.

Additionally, the decision to place a station inside the campus, in the area adjoining Bangla Academy and TSC, is particularly vexing. Trains at this station are expected to arrive with passengers headed for the major destinations of Dhaka New Market and Dhaka Medical

College Hospital, which will increase foot traffic and exacerbate the already pressing problem of outsiders crowding the DU campus.

A 2018 interview with the late National Professor Dr Jamilur Reza Chowdhury, published by *The Daily Star*, paints a clear picture of how the current alignment for the MRT 6 came to be.

"The other change was the construction of Mayor Hanif Flyover, previously not in the plan. It was originally selected as the route for MRT 6, terminating at Jatrabari. The revised alignment necessitated a route passing through east of TSC, University of Dhaka, towards Curzon Hall and then turning towards Topkhana Road and terminating in front of Bangladesh Bank," said the veteran professor.

This plan that he referred to is the Strategic Transport Plan (STP), the initial

version of which covered the period of 2005-2025. A Revised Strategic Transport Plan (RSTP) was drawn up in 2015. Why the city failed to adhere to a long-term plan that was already in place when the flyover's construction began in 2010 is hard to comprehend. This eventually led to the current alignment, and for the students who are opposed to the MRT 6 going through DU, it leaves us in a place where not much could be done to divert it.

The MRT 6 going through DU has been Plan B all along. The lack of a Plan C and the improbability of dedicating more funds and time to come up with one has hamstrung any and all protests against the current alignment.

There have been grumblings against the metro rail's construction among students right from the beginning. In 2016, students took to the streets to

protest it, but the student body was split in their actions.

I spoke to Meem Arafat Manab, a student at the time, to learn about the protests four years ago. "Students were angered when the first signs of work were visible. We gathered in front of Raju Bhashkarja, but the students were split into different groups with different ideas of what they wanted. The protests were disorganized, the leadership was confused, we contacted the VC, but in hindsight, I don't think there was much he could do," he recalls.

Yet, the protests never stopped. Most notably, earlier this year, students protested the felling of trees near TSC for a metro rail station, but to no avail. The coronavirus restrictions have not been ideal in gathering large crowds to voice any substantial opposition. Protests have been largely limited to social media, and failed to gather any momentum.

The first time I walked into the University of Dhaka campus as a student was a cold January morning in 2018. I had class at half past eight, so I got there with 20 minutes in hand and sat down on a broken bench outside TSC and got myself a cup of *malta cha*. I remember sitting down facing Raju Bhashkarja, and looking at Suhrawardy Udyan beyond it and really thinking about the significance of the history this venue had witnessed. The cup of tea in my hand was not the sole source of the warmth I felt at that moment, and I'm sure there had been many before me standing on the same spot, having the exact same feelings.

The fact that this view and the inspiration it provides will no longer be available for future generations may not seem worthy of consternation within the bounds of the cut-throat objectivity that drives development in our country. But if there's one place where subjective thinking and deliberation can be expected, it should be a university. The fact that such thinking never seems to materialise is, more than anything, disappointing.

Azmin Azran is a subeditor at SHOUT, *The Daily Star*, and a student of computer science and engineering at the University of Dhaka.

THE ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE PROJECT

University Life: A Dream or a Nightmare?

*The Academic Experience Project is a faculty-student collaborative work aimed to glean insights about the experiences of tertiary-level students. Each Friday, *The Daily Star* publishes an op-ed highlighting its findings. Today's is the third article of the series.*

SIFAT ZEREEN and SYED SAAD ANDALEEB

UNIVERSITY life is going to be the best time of your life! We often hear this growing up, and yet when we do reach that level, we find that it is not at all what we expected it to be. So, what exactly did we expect and why are we not satisfied?

The Academic Experience Project that evolved from a class project showed that the quality of campus life and that of academic programmes jointly play a part in determining whether students end up being satisfied with their university life. Students come together from varying backgrounds. While this may provide an exciting opportunity at socialising for some, for others it can be a stressful experience. With their newfound sense of freedom, taking part in club activities or hanging out together after classes is something that many students look forward to. However, the introverted students and those who come from various districts often suffer from anxiety as they worry about being accepted in their new environment. The high cost of education, especially in the private universities, can also weigh down the minds of many. Those who come out with flying colours in their pre-university exams and get admitted to a public university worry less about such costs.

Then there are those who struggle with the demands of their studies. Many come to the universities hoping to learn new and exciting things and grow with the challenges they expect to confront. The lucky ones even find help in the

form of like-minded and compassionate peers or seniors. Some take part in debates and competitions besides course work. Large numbers of students end up having to face the same old traditional way of learning—memorising materials that are not even updated in the context of a rapidly changing world. They start questioning what they are even learning at the university, and whether their academic experience will really be useful in real life, especially when they go out looking for jobs and building careers. They fail to experience and enjoy a rich learning process and end up being miserable and unable to associate positively with their educational institution.

Some students look for campuses with open grounds and gardens, while some look for state-of-the-art lab facilities and extensive libraries. There are still others who come with big dreams of doing something exceptional, benefiting society and the country at large. They have great expectations that the university will be where they find the big idea and expert guidance to take that initiative forward. Many universities do not manage to live up to those expectations.

So, what can universities do for the multitudes who feel miserable and continue to struggle during their undergraduate years and beyond? This is a question that must be addressed at many levels: from educational planners and policy makers to university administrators, faculty members, and even the students themselves.



Whether at a public institution or a private one, university life has the capacity to play a huge role in shaping the lives of students.

PHOTO: RANAK MARTIN

For starters, universities can draw realistic pictures of themselves during the orientation programme so that students know what they are signing up for and what kind of expectations to formulate. Universities could also arrange for interactive, fun sessions to help students settle in and socialise. In addition, they can adopt a more approachable and responsive attitude towards student complaints, viewing these as areas for improvement.

Whether or not we are willing to face reality, the fact is that the students' educational experience allows very little for exploration and self-discovery,

especially in terms of extra-curricular activities. While it may be difficult to accommodate this option at the primary and secondary education levels at present, universities can play a huge role by introducing to their students a range of people of different backgrounds, experiences and interests and take them beyond bookish knowledge. Seminar speakers, artists, social workers and a plethora of professional, social, and even political personages can be invited to campus to engage with the students and enlighten them.

It is also high time we moved away from the "only doctor-engineer-

businessman is acceptable" mentality to accepting the fact that students can have a passion for and talents in areas other than these traditional job roles. Researchers, painters, filmmakers, adventurers, musicians and writers can all get their start during the much-coveted "university life". The authorities will also be pleased to find that given the right platform and support, students will themselves come forward to form clubs, find activities to take part in, share ideas they have been bursting to pitch, and even find funding for various co-curricular activities. Besides, faculty members could also have much to offer beyond the typical classroom slides and lectures.

Whether at a public institution or a private one, university life has the capacity to play a much bigger role in shaping the lives of its students. They are not robots who can turn out productivity on demand. As humans, their productivity will always be tied to happiness, to finding motivation and enjoyment. Students and authorities must work jointly to transform university life into a worthwhile and diverse experience where one can add the highest value to oneself. And, together, they can become the most important co-creators of a better nation.

Sifat Zereen is working on her MBA degree at IBA, University of Dhaka. Syed Saad Andaleeb is Distinguished Professor Emeritus, Pennsylvania State University, and former Vice-Chancellor, BRAC University. The article is part of his collaboration with the IBA students to turn the spotlight on higher education in Bangladesh. For more information on The Academic Experience Project, contact Dr Andaleeb at bdresearchA2Z@gmail.com.

QUOTEABLE



ARTHUR ASHE
(1943-1993)
American tennis player.

Success is a journey, not a destination. The doing is often more important than the outcome.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Wall worker
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- 14 Outfits
- 15 Physics bit
- 17 RBI or ERA
- 18 Gooey cheese
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- 23 Hoop, perhaps
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- 28 "Lou Grant" star
- 31 2016 Olympics host
- 32 Take a breather
- 33 Joined the
- 34 Impact sound
- 36 Himalayan
- 38 Greenish brown
- 40 Stopwatch
- 42 Without aid
- 43 Without aid
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- 45 Rich cake
- 46 Bender
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- 51 Years gone by
- 52 Hamm of soccer
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- 56 Amorous archer
- 57 German denial
- 58 Sailor's quaff
- 59 Lead or lithium
- 60 Sow site
- 61 Expensive
- 62 "Repeat that?"
- 63 Ring of light
- 64 Give an address
- 65 Billions: Prefix
- 66 Cloth scrap
- 67 Pencil ends
- 68 "Scram!"
- 69 Director Spike
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