



Do all research proposals carry the same merit to have an equal share of funds?
PHOTO: MD ASADUZ ZAMAN

When university research is held hostage



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WE are all aware of the state higher education and research in Bangladesh is in. It is far from the acceptable standard; none of our universities—public or private—is in a respectable position in global rankings. Decades ago, I was under the impression that lack of funds was the reason behind it. However, after working within the system, I realised that the problem was rooted elsewhere. In recent years, the state revenue has expanded noticeably, which has impacted the budget of our public universities. Yet, research still appears to be neglected when funds are allocated. Public universities have received hefty amounts for infrastructure, deemed as “development budget” by the policymakers. Like many of my colleagues, I wonder how the notion of “development” has been narrowed down so much that it excludes the research and knowledge-building aspects of university education. Why do our policymakers prefer physical growth over intellectual ones?

In recent years, establishing institutional quality assessment cells (IQACs) in universities has been a crucial step taken to improve higher education. It is not an easy task to

initiate a mechanism of accountability and transparency by overriding the existing bureaucratic matrix. Not only are there cultural barriers at the recipients’ end, but often the trainers seem to be obsessed with issues related to the newly introduced bureaucracy. Yet, I believe that reconceptualisation of teaching-learning in Bangladesh’s higher education system should be prioritised, and setting up IQACs in this regard is a laudable first step.

However, such steps will only be successful if we, the actors involved in the goings-on of the universities, accept the fact that the existing system is no longer functional, and therefore allow and—more importantly—act for its change. The cornerstone of the problem is the nexus of power within the universities and the upper tiers—i.e. the University Grants Commission (UGC), the government, etc. This nexus and the relationships around it are often labelled as “shikhhok rajniti” (teachers’ politics). The term, an improper coinage, imprisons its meaning to a parochial pattern of patron-client relationship. This particular form takes over the system within the universities and their relationship with the higher echelon of power. The root cause of the system’s failure lies there. The state of distribution of research grants in public universities could be a case for it.

The amount of yearly allocation for research in public universities is still inadequate, which, of course, is a problem. But more importantly, the process of internal distribution of research funds seems to be highly flawed. A report in this daily, published on December 13, 2021, rightly pointed out the issue in the case of Jahangirnagar University. The

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allocated research fund is distributed equally among all the applicants of a particular faculty, regardless of the merit (or lack thereof) of the proposal or the research idea. Treating proposals of varied strengths with mechanical equality is a poor practice, which in turn discourages good research and researchers.

Why do the universities continue such practices, then? There should be a process to distribute the allocated research budget. A committee should be formed, whose task would be to screen research proposals. Based on their merits and innovativeness, as well as the nature of the study, proposals should be rejected or rewarded. The amount of the award will also vary according to the above-mentioned criteria. As the report stated, there has been no case of rejection or referring back of research proposals in recent years. Does that mean every proposal was worth the research? Were all of them equally well-articulated, meritorious, and insightful? The report quoted a comment from a UGC official, who emphasised the competitiveness in distributing the research grant. But frustratingly enough, the person also said that the UGC was not aware of the situation.

One can blame the existing rules for this situation. However, in my experience, rules are not necessarily flawed; the way universities bent them in favour of the petty interests of certain groups is what the core of the problem is. Quoting the teachers of Jahangirnagar University, the report stated the university authorities had formed a high-power committee, with the vice-chancellor as the chair. This committee should act following the basic principles of scope, originality, and

competence. In the existing university structure, a dean is meant to be an academic leader. Deans can play a crucial role in screening the research proposals and allocating funds. But instead, things work in an inappropriate, “democratic” fashion. Why?

The answer is pretty clear. Such decisions are popular and profitable. Screening and rejecting a proposal may result in huge repercussions, and could impact any of the future elections. The nexus of power, therefore, is extremely cautious. They want to maintain the status quo at the cost of anything and everything. If these small ripples ensure a lion’s share of power, why would a “great mind” do otherwise?

A few “great minds” are the agenda-setters of the nexus. But they want to ensure the widest-possible base for their power. Voters from the same political faction are not enough for them—they require an even larger chunk. Populist agendas with immediate material gains, therefore, come to the top of the list. This vote-driven populism has taken over the entire system—not only in the form of circulating research grants as petty cash or easy money to incompetent recipients, but in various other forms. Teachers’ associations and their representative bodies across the institutions over the years have been working as trade unions. Greater commitment towards society, the state, universities or education in general is rare to find these days. The power-monger form of “shikhhok rajniti” has been promoting a culture of “halua-ruti” lately. And one must not forget that the universities and their teachers are only a part of a greater corrupt arrangement.

QUOTABLE Quote

TONI MORRISON

(1931 - 2019)
American novelist

Women's rights is not only an abstraction, a cause; it is also a personal affair. It is not only about us; it is also about me and you. Just the two of us.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS	32 Snap	5 Convey
1 Fixed a chair seat	33 Engine sound	6 Internet connector
6 Calendar page	34 Nonsense	7 Cry of surprise
11 Give an address	35 Inquire	8 Midsection ring, e.g.
12 Chicago airport	36 Clumsy person	9 Claire of “Key Largo”
13 Court rapper	37 Lot sight	10 Because of this
14 White Cliffs setting	38 Barn section	17 Revolts
15 Court org.	40 Tolerate	23 Whole bunch
16 Rage	42 Runway worker	24 Kinsey topic
18 Planning time	43 TV’s Leary	26 Tart cooler
19 Feel poorly	44 Winter gliders	27 Twitches
20 Lively spirit	45 Periphery	28 Starter’s need
21 Court hit		30 Band helper
22 Elevator connections	DOWN	31 Accent
24 Agile	1 French brandy	33 Corridors
25 Rhine siren	2 Middle East peninsula	39 Went ahead
27 Location stopper	3 Shipping	41 Garden section
29 Philly cagers	4 Seine summer	

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