

Public universities and research: In 2022 and beyond



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Research is like the cygnet: it grows and transforms with power and beauty. It represents endurance, elegance, promise and joy! (Adapted from a quote on a consumer product)

The budget for Bangladesh's education sector in 2020-21 was Tk 66,400 crore: nearly half or Tk 33,118 crore was allocated for secondary and higher education. Historically, this budget has been between 11-14 percent of the national budget and around 2 percent of the country's GDP. The scale of public funding for education predictably evokes the question: What has been the real impact of this expenditure? In higher education, Bangladesh's public universities expend the lion's share of the budget. Yet their role in research and its impact has been inconsequential.

The Global Knowledge Index 2020 placed Bangladesh at 112th out of 138 nations. And in the ranking indexes, where research plays a prominent role, Bangladesh's public universities are placed rather ignominiously, if at all. Data further reveal that the universities cannot even spend what they receive for research. In 2016-17 a mere Tk 12.16 crore was allocated for research; yet only Tk 8.16 crore was spent. The public universities have not explained this inability to use taxpayer provided funds for research, nor has the University Grants Commission ever clarified such anomaly in a world hungry for research funds.

This essay attempts to provide a broad framework to take research forward in Bangladesh's public universities and help them play a more vigorous role in national affairs. The proposed steps, not

necessarily in linear fashion, are not just about getting the universities ready for research; the approach is more holistic because research can only be cultivated within an ecosystem which nurtures research and is reciprocally nurtured by it.

The first and most important step is national commitment to research, supported by funding. For decades, there has been serious inattention to this matter. The amounts currently allocated are also deemed negligible, although that view is debatable (see my essay on "Some questions on DU's Research Budget"). It is heartening to note that HE, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has publicly stated that she takes research seriously, urging university faculty to come forth with proposals. To be seriously considered, such proposals must endeavour to show both material and image-enhancing benefits.

The second step is to understand what a research university really is. As I see it, these universities are immersed in rigorous and challenging work, passionately pursuing new realms of knowledge, often in a process involving teacher and student, collaborating institutions, and global partnerships. The goal is discovery and problem-solving, partly reflected in publications that are recognised, frequently cited, and applauded for their impact. Such research depends primarily on top-class graduate programmes and meritorious graduate students led by creative, dedicated, and research-capable faculty mentors. When teaching is research-led, the learning of both teacher and student is greatly enhanced with deep potential impact.

By the above definition, no public university in Bangladesh is a research university. In the past 50 years, they have



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focused staunchly on teaching, churning out degrees but producing little to no serious research. Many faculty simply do not publish; if they do, it is irregular and generally not peer-reviewed. The relevance and impact of their publications are thus dubious.

Research proficient faculty publish through a peer review process, take pride in the citations and impact generated by their work, and are confident about showcasing their work to the public. I have argued in the past that details of all faculty research, including working papers and books, must be placed on the institution's website. This will be the true and transparent test of the quality of research fashioned in the public

universities.

The third step is to draw up a comprehensive perspective plan to incorporate research into national strategy. China, for example, began the arduous journey of breaking into the global academic ranks in the 1980s. The lead role played by the government in supporting the initiative has been exemplary. In addition to providing funding to the education sector to the tune of 4 percent of GNP, in stages, the government generously supported nine top universities to attain global quality standards and be recognised for research. China today has four universities in the top 100.

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