

The Asian University for Women – Making a difference

The Asian University for Women (AUW) based in Chattogram is a unique initiative in higher education in Bangladesh and aims to make a difference in the lives of its students and through them, the countries and societies they come from.

Set up by an act of parliament and under the patronage of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, it aims to identify and develop young women with leadership potential, however limiting their background and personal circumstances may be.

The government made a grant of 140 acres of land in a beautiful setting just outside Chattogram city. The site was inaugurated in 2011 by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and a master plan has been developed by the renowned architect Moshe Safdie.

Construction started this year, and the Campus Centre is scheduled to open in 2024. As well as providing ample space for current academic programmes, the new campus will allow the expansion of several new graduate programmes. It will also facilitate an AUW education for a substantially greater number of students.

AUW students come from Bangladesh and across Asia. So far, students have come from nineteen different countries, from Syria in the west to Timor Leste in the east. Special programmes have been crafted for particular groups of women, for example from the garment worker and tea plantation sectors in Bangladesh and for those coming from crisis situations internationally.

The Pathways for Promise programme at AUW is especially praiseworthy because it supports women garment workers' families while their daughters get educated at the university. Every four out of five students, whether from Bangladesh or abroad, are on full scholarships provided by domestic and international donors. Meanwhile, many fee-paying students are given partial fee remission on a need basis.

AUW offers its students a world-class liberal arts education. Liberal arts for AUW



Academic Building (Under Construction) designed by Moshe Safdie

means introducing students to the whole range of human knowledge, including the natural and social sciences, the humanities and creative arts such as dance, theatre and film-making. These broad-ranging courses encourage the development of critical thinking skills, the ability to write and communicate effectively and an easy familiarity with digital technology.

In essence, they are geared to motivate students to contribute to human development in every sphere of life. AUW aspires to produce graduates who are effective change agents in their own communities and citizens of the world. To achieve this, students receive a systematic introduction to a wide range of disciplines,

followed by specialisation in either a single or double major.

The majors currently available are public health (the most popular), bioinformatics, environmental studies, economics and philosophy, politics and economics. A new major in computer science will be launched in summer 2023.

An exciting new development at AUW has been made possible by a grant from the Andrew W Mellon Foundation in the US. It funds the appointment of nine postdoctoral fellows recruited from across the world in history, philosophy, comparative religious studies and literature. The first of them will arrive in January 2023 and will work with the academic leadership of AUW to develop new majors in the humanities.

One of the defining features of AUW is the vibrant student life, centred on the lane that runs between the academic and residential buildings on MM Ali Road in the centre of the city. Student clubs cater to diverse interests and meet on a regular basis. Many students have blossomed as poets, writers and dancers. They are encouraged to play games like basketball and table tennis and to take up swimming and martial arts like karate.

To serve the needs of its own graduates and others, AUW has developed a two-year master's degree in education. The degree is taught in a hybrid format. Online classes are delivered in real time by established scholars at universities in North America and the UK.

Chattogram-based teaching fellows support the students with additional classes and with assignments. The first cohort of

students enrolled in January 2022 and will complete their degrees at the end of 2023. As a part of their practical training, students are already offering online teaching to 12th grade girls in Afghanistan who have been denied schooling since August 2021.

A new cohort of students will be starting in January 2023 and will include students from Bangladesh and other countries. Other master's degrees are in the pipeline, including one tailored for Bangladesh's garment industry, namely an MSc in apparel and retail management.

The first cohort of AUW students graduated in 2013 and their achievements will be celebrated at the January 2023 commencement. Since that first cohort, over a thousand students have completed their degrees and gone on to a wide range of careers.

Some have gone on to graduate studies in leading universities across the world, including Oxford, Cambridge, Stanford, MIT, Princeton, Aga Khan University and many others. Others have completed doctorates and are beginning to make their mark in the academic world. AUW itself recently recruited its first alumna to the faculty as an assistant professor in computer science. Yet, others have gone into the private sector and are being encouraged to establish themselves as entrepreneurs.

Also, many AUW graduates are now working in international organisations and NGOs. As they move ahead to the next stages in their careers, they will truly begin to make a difference.



AUW Founder, Mr. Kamal Ahmad, with students from various countries.