



ILLUSTRATION: REHNUMA PROSHOON

What’s in a university ranking?



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It's an awful time for many universities in Bangladesh, both public and private, that are struggling with their reputation. Over 49,000 students left Bangladesh last year for a whole host of reasons, the biggest being that the local higher education institutions (HEI), with a few exceptions, have either failed or are failing in their teaching and research missions. Focus for most students in the public is to get into the Bangladesh Civil Service; studying the actual subject they enrolled in comes second. Opening new departments typically benefits teachers and their vote bank. In effect, too many institutions function more like teaching factories, with many of their faculty teaching at other institutions, typically private ones, to make a quick buck. The folks who are busy running between campuses have no time for teaching at either place and, surely, no time for conducting any substantive research.

A large number of our students are leaving for Australia, EU and North America, majority of whom may never return. Others are studying in countries not too far from Bangladesh as a first try. A large majority of them will then seek destinations far away from our immediate neighbourhood, where they will be valued for their academic and technical prowess and not for their political affiliation and connections. Many students of Bangladeshi institutions will find that the programmes are neither rigorous nor have ever been subjected to any *real* global accrediting bodies. Such students, to their regret, will have little choice but to repeat their degrees yet again overseas.

Ranking data pertaining to Dhaka University, in particular, was documented first in *Dhaka University: Can It Turn Around?* (BDNews24.com, December 24, 2011). A group of DU's faculty members did a follow-up with the book *University of Dhaka: Making, Unmaking, and Remaking*. It articulated and hoped "if a generation of humans got involved in *making* the university and sadly another generation in *unmaking* it, then surely there is hope that, yet another generation of humans will engage themselves in *remaking* the university." Unfortunately, those who are driving the HEIs in Bangladesh are more often in denial; a few use universities, typically private, as cash-cows; and others are either unwilling or unequipped to interpret data and take necessary corrective actions to prevent the downfall.

The ranking matrix of Times Higher Education (THE), which has garnered attention recently, assigns weights to the following major areas: academics (30 percent), research (27.5), citations/faculty (32.5), industrial support (2.5), and internationalisation (7.5). In the latest ranking, one institution from Brunei, 24 from India, 21 from Iran, eight from Pakistan, 11 from Malaysia, 15 from Saudi Arabia, and eight from Türkiye were recognised as Top 800 global HEIs, but not even a single university from Bangladesh, public or private, could be part of that list. Four universities – two private and

two public, namely Brac University, Dhaka University, Jahangirnagar University (JU) and North South University (NSU) – were ranked between 801 and 1,000.

According to THE data, Bangladeshi universities didn't provide institutional data to THE until the start of 2019. Dhaka University, the country's first university and so-called "Oxford of the East," emerged in the 2020 THE ranking between 1,001 and 1,200. In the 2021 ranking, Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (Buet) joined DU in the bracket. Six universities from Bangladesh tried for 2022 THE ranking, and three were successful; DU gained ground and was ranked between 801 and 1,000, and Buet slipped to the 1,201-1,500 bracket. Bangladesh Agricultural University (BAU) was ranked for the first time between 1,001 and 1,200.

Fifteen HEIs from Bangladesh tried for the 2023 ranking. DU did better than the prior year and ranked between 601 and 800, and for the first time, NSU's name appeared as it was placed in the same bracket. A great year for both universities – one public and one private. Unfortunately, we

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saw BAU losing ground, ranking between 1201 and 1500. Khulna University of Engineering and Technology (Kuet) got in for the first time, and along with BAU and Buet, ranked between 1,201 and 1,500. Twenty-one HEI's participated in the 2024 ranking. Both NSU and DU lost ground, and JU and BracU got in for the first time, with all four ranking between 801 and 1,000. BAU, Buet and Kuet saw no changes.

If the trend shows any hope, it's that each year more Bangladeshi HEIs, to their credit, are trying to be ranked. Also, a lesson learnt is that getting ranked higher will never be easy without rectifying the institutions significantly (in terms of faculty quality and programme strength), as well as sustaining and continually bolstering those changes. The standing of HEIs is determined typically by the prowess of their faculty, as measured by both the quality and quantity of new knowledge generated by them, and

the success of their graduates.

If the institutions can have their own professional academic programmes – such as those centring business, engineering, health, and pharmacy – and seek accreditation from *real* bodies, they can generate better and marketable products both within and outside Bangladesh. For a long time, many in Bangladesh have given the excuse of wanting to become a signatory to the Washington Accord for not seeking accreditation; however, it will be a long drawn-out process. The current full signatories from our own neighbourhood, not surprisingly, include India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. In recent times, we are thinking of a substitute local accrediting body like the Bangladesh Accreditation Council to somehow guarantee quality professional education. However, the BAC is not being able to deliver on quality acceptable outside, and in this context, in my humble opinion, this latest endeavour is going to waste more years from the life of our current universities.

By talking to dozens of private university graduates who went to the US and have become successful citizens of the world, I am certain that we have talents but not the path or process to guarantee their success within Bangladesh. On the bright side, NSU has already succeeded in getting her business programmes accredited by the Accreditation Council for Business School and Programs (ACBSP), which should pave the path for eventual accreditation by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), the gold standard for business graduates.

Too many of the HEI administrators in Bangladesh don't offer confidence about what it might take to push forward their own institutions. It is concerning when a pro-vice chancellor makes simple statements such as "will be among top 50 global universities if research allocation increased" or when a vice chancellor compares university ranking with cost borne by students when buying tea and snacks. Money alone will not improve research reputation unless and until the institutions overcome the challenge of good governance, and both students and faculty become free from both violence and political dominance. In 2020, out of 46 public universities, 38 spent a total of Tk 72.91 crore in research, while out of 107 private universities, 77 spent TK 111.73 crore for research purposes, according to University Grants Commission. It may not be a coincidence that two private universities, namely BracU and NSU, both known for having recruited relatively strong faculty, continue to lead the pack of private universities in THE ranking.

The HEI leaders must understand, when one is pushing their own institution upward that every other institution in the whole world is also pushing themselves harder. In this race for the top, world-class HEIs are more like Sisyphus having to roll an immense boulder up a steep climb only for it to roll down when they near the top. As can be imagined, the best and most successful institutions, thus, try their best so that they can at least hold on to (if not further improve) their latest rank. Jorge Sabato, the Argentinian physicist who pioneered science and technology policy in Latin America, used to say that "it takes 15 years of hard work to build a world-class research university, but only two years to destroy it."

How plastic waste can drive the economy forward



A CLOSER LOOK

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TASNEEM TAYEB

So, what happens when you discard a used plastic bottle in a bin? The journey is nothing short of a Jules Verne adventure novel.

The discarded, or in technical terms "post-consumed," PET bottle is collected by the waste workers doing duty for local waste collection contractors, under the umbrella of the city corporations.

It then goes in the waste van and after that to a collection spot. From there, the bottle, along with other recyclables, is sorted out for the second phase of the journey to the recycling destination. It reaches a scrap dealer and then a PET collector, who removes the caps and labels and washes and bales the bottle to be delivered to the recycler.

at 22.25 kg. Every day, about 646 tonnes of plastic waste is collected in the city, around 10 percent of all waste generated across the country. Unfortunately, as mentioned earlier, only about one-third of this plastic waste is recycled. Apart from this, about 48 percent of this waste is dumped in landfill, 12 percent goes into the rivers and canals, and three percent ends up in drains and other unserved areas of the two city corporations. According to the World Bank report, "An estimated 24,032-36,047 tons of plastic waste are disposed of per year in 1,212 hot spots around khals and rivers, all of which are connected to the river system."

Moving on to solutions: there are

Moreover, the majority of people are not even aware of the different segregations of waste, and how each should be disposed of, or more importantly, where. As a result, valuable recyclables often end up in landfills, instead of recycling facilities. Apart from lack of public trash bins and awareness on waste disposal, a lack of penalty for environmental pollution through littering also encourages such acts.

However, beyond the basics, one of the key challenges is that the country's waste management system is still highly informal, with cheap labour being exploited by the local thikadars or contractors, who get the mandate from city corporations to collect waste from households, organisations and other touchpoints for various localities. On top of the workers not being trained on waste segregation or waste evaluation, they are also not empowered with knowledge on how they can earn extra by selling the recyclables to scrap dealers. There is also a red



Only less than half of the plastic waste generated in Dhaka is recycled.

PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

At the recycler's facility, the bottle goes through multiple washing, cleaning, reforming processes, and is then turned into clean flakes. Then begins the final journey. If these flakes are meant for export, they are packed and shipped off to new destinations, such as Vietnam, Indonesia, India, Russia and even China. If they are to be circulated back into the local economy, these flakes are turned into polyester yarn and fabric, among other substances, as raw material for the RMG sector, or into 100 percent food grade recycled resin, used for making new PET bottles. So, a used plastic bottle can re-emerge as a new one through recycling, support the growing RMG sector, or make a new life for itself in a foreign land.

But only less than half of the plastic waste generated in Dhaka is recycled. In the 2021 World bank report, titled "Towards a Multisectoral Action Plan for Sustainable Plastic Management in Bangladesh," the number stood at only 37.2 percent.

Not that the plastic recycling industry is lagging behind in capacity. According to media reports, there are more than 300 plastic recycling factories in Bangladesh, which make the much-in-demand plastic flakes. Around 40,000 tonnes of recycled flakes are exported every year by 80 of these facilities.

To utilise the existing capacity of the plastic recycling industry, there is a need for about 200,000 tonnes of plastic scrap, against a supply of 70,000 tonnes, sourced both locally and through imports. As a result, not only are the recyclers struggling, but as an economy, we are not able to turn plastic pollution into a lever for growth.

While the problem and opportunities have been identified, we need to find solutions to make sure plastic does not end up in landfills, and are rather turned into a source of export income for us. Looking at the data might give a clearer picture of the economic opportunities. If we look at Dhaka alone, the capital's annual per capita plastic consumption stands

multiple factors that we need to look at to come up with a comprehensive approach to turn plastic waste into an income source.

The first piece of the puzzle is ensuring an effective waste disposal mechanism. We have seen cities across the country going underwater, even in the face of moderate rain, and one of the major reasons identified is plastic waste clogging the drains. This is because

While the problem and opportunities have been identified, we need to find solutions to make sure plastic does not end up in landfills, and are rather turned into a source of export income for us. Looking at the data might give a clearer picture of the economic opportunities. If we look at Dhaka alone, the capital's annual per capita plastic consumption stands at 22.25 kg. Every day, about 646 tonnes of plastic waste is collected in the city, around 10 percent of all waste generated across the country. Unfortunately, only about one-third of this plastic waste is recycled.

flag in this sector: the persistent and rampant exploitation of child labour. Tokai or rag pickers, as we call them, range from toddlers to teenagers and are provided with a paltry payment for their labour-intensive task. This should be rectified immediately, with social welfare authorities ensuring that these kids go to school.

Apart from these, there seems to be a lack of ownership by the city corporations in the entire waste management ecosystem. The policymakers have formulated sound policies, such as the Solid Waste Management Rules 2021 and the National 3R (Reduce, Reuse and Recycle) Strategy, based on which the Extended Producer Responsibility is also in the pipeline. However, these policies are only as good as their implementation. If the waste collection and disposal mechanisms are not in line with these policies, they will be rendered ineffective, just like the 2002 ban on polythene bags.

It is high time the policymakers, Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Department of Environment, and the city corporations acknowledged their responsibility, took stock of the situation and worked in tandem to formulate, implement, and enforce effective policies on plastic waste management.

Towards this endeavour, waste workers should be trained on waste evaluation and segregation and should be connected to the extended recycling value chain so that they can play their role in driving a circular economy on plastic, while improving their own livelihood.

The government has a target to reduce plastic waste by 30 percent by 2030. To support export of recycled flakes and polyester staple fibre, the government is also providing a 10 percent subsidy. Along with the good initiatives are piecemeal ones as well. What we need to do now is strengthen the recycling industry and streamline the waste management system, so that as a nation we can turn the plastic pollution problem into an opportunity for economic growth.