DHAKA THURSDAY OCTOBER 10, 2024, *ASHWIN 25, 1431 BS* | A PUBLICATION OF The Daily Star

CAMPUS

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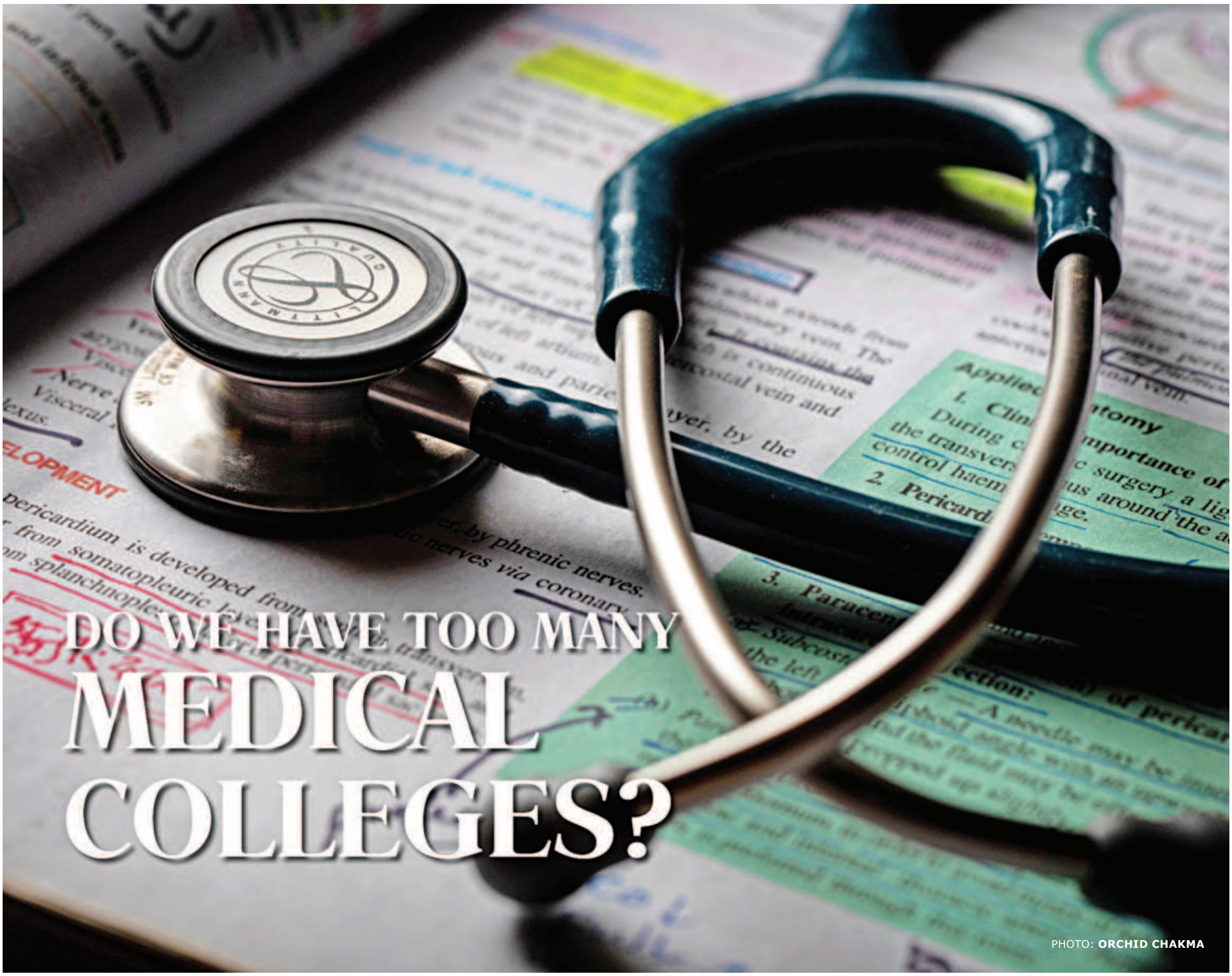

DO WE HAVE TOO MANY MEDICAL COLLEGES?

PHOTO: **ORCHID CHAKMA**

MUSIC

Wave to earth's newest album encapsulates the full spectrum of youth

SHAIKH SABIK KAMAL

The Korean indie band, wave to earth embarked on a new journey surrounded by stardom following the release of their debut album *0.1 flaws and all*. The band, however, has managed to release yet another charming album with a pleasant twist. *Play with earth! 0.03* is the second album from wave to earth featuring only seven tracks.

The first thing that caught my attention was the incorporation of a more confident yet playful flair. The first half of the album specialises in laying out the essence of "playing with earth" as the songs juxtapose comfort with excitement, without disturbing their signature melancholia. The relatability of the songs peeks through the lyrics where the bitterness of a monotonous life is emancipated with a "playful" sound.

Instead of featuring a single aspect, their music encapsulates different parts of youth and blends them with sonic tranquillity which is best reflected in tracks like "annie." and "beck." especially when the entire album is heard from front to back. The fourth track "Pueblo" which is a remaster of their old track, seamlessly ties the themes of the two halves of the album. With songs like "slow dive" and "holyland" it also becomes apparent that the band has learned to steer clear of being overindulgent with any one sound.

Nonetheless, I do have some reservations. The album's runtime is less than half of their debut album with the entire record clocking in at only 25 minutes. And the fact that such a short duration includes an intro as the opening track as well as a remaster of an old song did rub me the wrong way.

Overall though, *Play with earth! 0.03* is a calm, youthful, and melancholic album that should be a proud inclusion to wave to earth's discography. Even if they don't belong in the same bracket with bigger names yet, wave to earth have proven themselves as an act that is capable of more than just making hits for internet reels.

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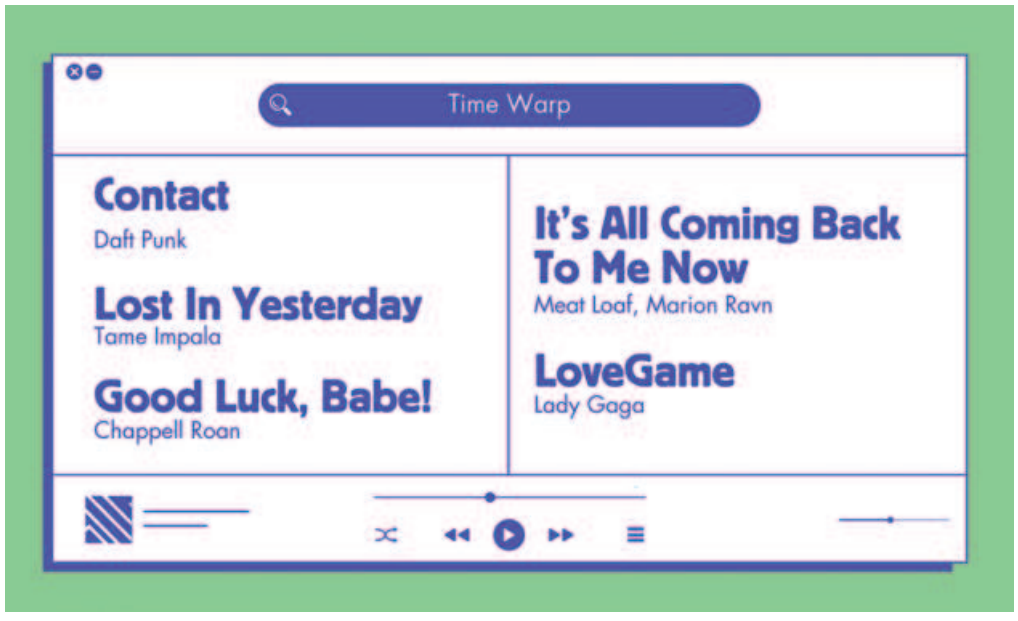

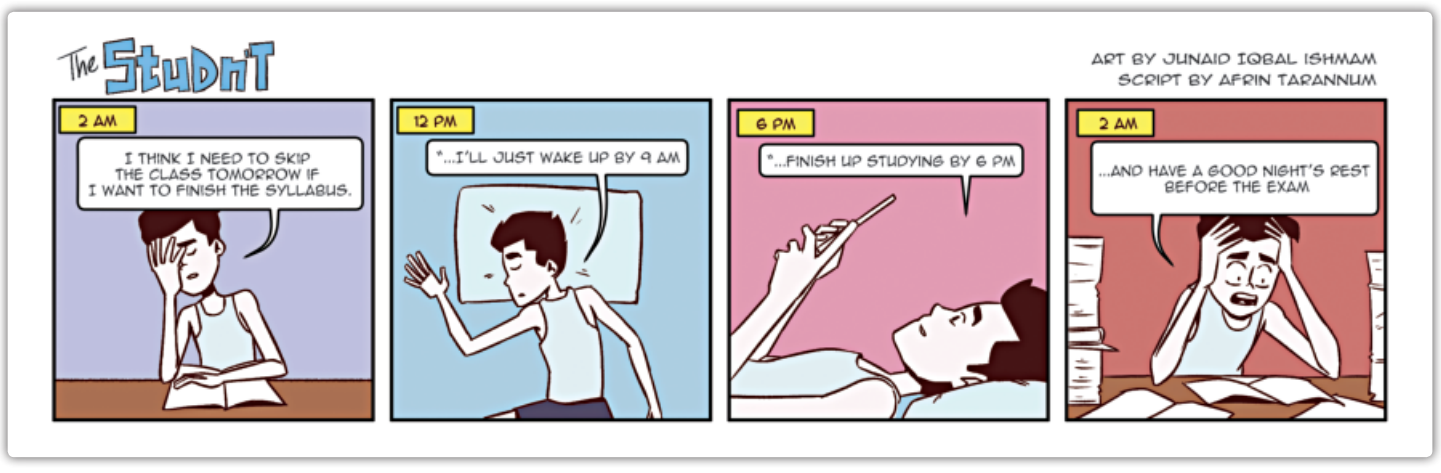

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CAREER

Unreliable internet connectivity and its impact on BANGLADESHI FREELANCERS

TINATH ZAEBA

The rise of freelancing has reshaped the global workforce, providing countless opportunities for individuals to build careers independently. In Bangladesh, the freelancer community has flourished, with over 10,50,000 professionals working in fields like content creation, graphic design, digital marketing, software development, and so on. Yet, the nationwide internet blackout earlier in July reflected ongoing issues with internet connectivity – problems that have always been present but were really highlighted during the outage.

Most freelancers in Bangladesh use platforms like Upwork and Fiverr. These platforms allow them to set up profiles, offer their services, and set their own rates. Success on these platforms often depends on ratings from clients. Better ratings lead to better visibility and the ability to charge higher rates according to their worth.

Harun Ar Rashid, 35, a freelancer on Upwork and Fiverr, was one of many whose work was severely impacted during the five-day internet blackout during the quota reform protests in July. "I had three pending gigs that I had already completed, but I couldn't submit them before the internet went down. The clients cancelled the orders due to my lack of response, and all my hours of work were wasted."

Rashid also spoke about the effect this had on his ratings saying, "As I couldn't communicate with my prospective clients and had to leave discussions halfway through, they left lower ratings on my profile, which will impact my ability to secure future clients. Fiverr is yet to address this issue."

The internet blackout also sparked discussions about whether freelancers are too dependent on these platforms. Freelancing is supposed to offer freedom and control over work, but platforms like Upwork and Fiverr sort of act as gatekeepers. They control the flow of work, visibility of profiles, and payment processes. Freelancers' success often depends on algorithms they can't control. Without other ways to reach clients or generate work, freelancers rely on these platforms, which can limit their independence and potential for success.

Despite these issues, many stay with these platforms because they offer access to a global client base, even though direct client outreach might offer more freedom and higher earnings.

The internet blackout also made freelancers reflect on their everyday frustrations. For them, the internet isn't just a convenience; it's their lifeline. Problems are made worse due to frequent load-shedding and unreliable internet connectivity, which interrupt work at crucial times.

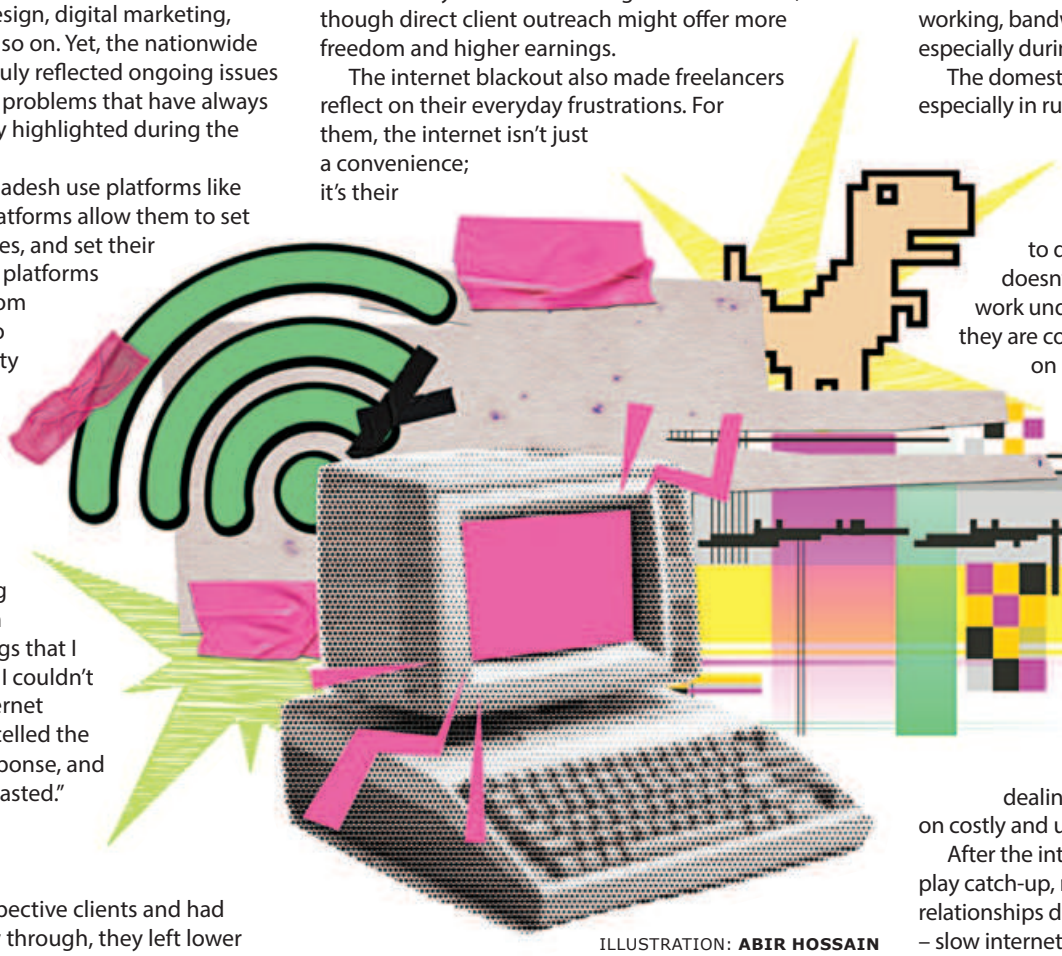


ILLUSTRATION: **ABIR HOSSAIN**

Tanaz Masaba, 28, a freelance SEO content writer on Upwork, shared her frustration, "There's nothing worse than losing hours of work due to load shedding. And in Bangladesh, internet reliability is a constant issue."

Bangladesh's internet relies on submarine cables to connect to global networks. These cables can be damaged by natural disasters or human activities like fishing and shipping, leading to service disruptions. Long downtimes due to maintenance work being done on these cables are also not uncommon. Even when they're working, bandwidth limitations cause congestion, especially during peak times, slowing down speeds.

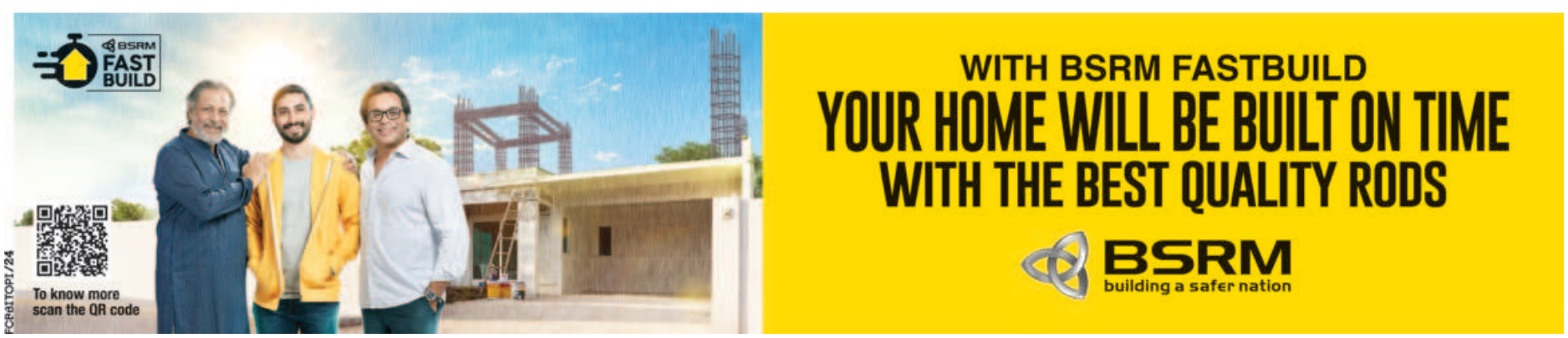
The domestic fibre optic network is growing, especially in rural areas where fast and reliable internet is still hard to come by. Frequent power outages and load-shedding only add to the problem.

As a result, they have no choice but to deal with the fact that the infrastructure doesn't always meet their needs, forcing them to work under less-than-ideal conditions even when they are connected. For those whose work relies on a stable internet connection, like digital marketers or graphic designers, any interruption can disrupt their entire workflow.

For many freelancers, working under these conditions means living with uncertainty. The blackout in July was a harsh reminder of how fragile the system is and how easily their work can be disrupted by both major events and everyday problems. Freelancers have been dealing with these issues for years, often relying on costly and unreliable mobile data as a backup.

After the internet was restored, freelancers had to play catch-up, renegotiating deadlines and fixing client relationships damaged by days of silence. The core issues – slow internet speeds, unreliable service, and costly alternatives – still need to be addressed. As Bangladesh moves forward with its digital development, it needs to tackle these systemic problems to support its growing freelance community.

Tinath Zaeba is an optimistic daydreamer, a cat mom of five, and a student of Economics at North South University.



PHOTOS: **ORCHID CHAKMA**

Do we have too many MEDICAL COLLEGES?

Bangladesh has earned a reputation for being a hub of medical education on the undergraduate level in this region of the world. Every year MBBS aspirants from Nepal, Bhutan, India, Pakistan, and even Malaysia get admitted into our medical colleges. We have about 37 public medical colleges alongside 67 private medical colleges in the country offering about 11420 undergraduate seats in total.

MEHRAB JAMEE

The Directorate General of Medical Education (DGME) supervises these colleges while the Bangladesh Medical and Dental Council (BMDC) provides the curriculum. A central medical admission test held every year by the DGHS provides a ranked list which they then use to assign a medical college to an applicant based on the student's rank and the college's demand.

Previously, this rule only applied to the 5380 seats in public medical colleges. Private colleges could negotiate with students on tuition in accordance with their rank. The tuition hovers in the range of BDT 30 lacs to 45 lacs for the entire course with most colleges requiring BDT 20-24 lacs of advance payment.

However, allegations were raised that private medical colleges were taking in lower-ranking students for higher pay overlooking the merit score. For these reasons, from the 2022-23 session, the DGHS affirmed that the merit-based allotment system, previously in use to assign seats in public medical colleges, would extend to private medical colleges as well. This was done to establish a meritocratic system that would be fair to the students.

This year, however, the Bangladesh Private Medical College Association (BPMCA) has reported 1200 vacant seats in their medical colleges while the number is around 635 according to statistics provided by the health ministry. Even so, only 242 seats were vacant according to the ministry in 2022-23 which means there is a threefold rise in the number of vacant seats. Of 6040 seats offered by private medical colleges, a staggering 20 percent seats remain vacant.

Seats being vacant was unimaginable a few years back yet now private medical colleges in the capital are also facing a crisis of students. Faria*, a student of Dhaka Community Medical College said, "87 applicants were admitted against 100 seats this year in our college. 13 seats remain vacant. This is the condition up till June."

Dhaka Community Medical College is one of the reputed private colleges in the capital. The condition in some colleges outside the capital is even worse. It is evident to many aspirants that we currently do not possess the infrastructure to provide the graduating doctors with employment or postgraduate opportunities. Without the assurance of a stable future, students aren't willing to pay the high course fees and are choosing to pursue other degrees.

Fresh MBBS graduates face a very difficult and uncertain future. After spending five years to complete one of the hardest undergraduate degrees, they have to face near insurmountable odds again to get a job.

If a graduate wants to seek a job right away, then the starting salary is around BDT 15 to 20 thousand a month. A more lucrative position is to join as a BCS health cadre. But even in the 45th BCS, only 539 individuals were selected. Realising that there is a higher salary for specialists, a graduate may then choose to pursue a postgraduate degree. But here too there remains a bottleneck.

According to data provided by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare's Human Resources Development Unit, some 2042 seats are available for pursuing a postgraduate in the 20 national institutes and 10 medical colleges. The number increases by another 1300 or 1400 including FCPS programmes offered under the Bangladesh College of Physicians and Surgeons (BCPS) which means there are around 3500 seats for pursuing a postgraduate in this country against over 11 thousand graduates every year. This imbalance leads to frustration among MBBS graduates.

When asked about his anxieties as a fresh MBBS graduate, Dr Rashed*, a graduate of the 2015-16 session said, "The number of undergraduate seats has gone up along with the need for doctors in our country. The number of medical colleges has also gone up and in turn the number of intern doctors passing out every year. The problem is despite public demand, we currently do not possess the infrastructure to employ all of them."

Regarding the postgraduate opportunities and the compensation being offered to postgraduate trainees, Dr Rashed further added, "The number of postgraduate seats has increased, but the competition is still fierce. The chance of getting in is slim and the chance of getting into a subject you prefer is slimmer still. For those who get in, they're offered a meager salary of BDT 30 thousand a month. There have been protests over this but the compensation wasn't raised substantially. They are barred from private practice too. How can a 26/27-year-old doctor support their own expenses let alone the expenses of their family with this? We need a stable source of income and we need more postgraduate seats"

There is a particular lack of postgraduate seats in the eight basic subjects of MBBS curriculum – Anatomy, Physiology, Biochemistry, Community Medicine, Forensic Medicine, Pathology, Microbiology, and Pharmacology. These subjects are vital to medical education. However, with limited opportunities for high-paying jobs and clinical practice, very few fresh graduates choose to pursue a career in these subjects.

According to statistics presented by the DGME at a conference where deans of 36 medical colleges were present, 2459 teaching positions remain vacant out of a required 5920. Out of 2005 posts required in basic subjects, 588 remain vacant which amounts to almost 30 percent. Abdullah Al Mamun, a student of a renowned public medical college in Dhaka said, "There is an acute shortage of teachers in basic subjects. Our Forensic Medicine department has only one Assistant Professor. None of the other teachers are from a Forensic background" The shortage of specialised teachers, curators, and professors may also be a reason why students are losing interest in pursuing an MBBS. Concerns are rising about the quality of medical education being offered.

On this issue, Dr Anowar Hossain, a lecturer at Mugda Medical College said, "I think there are too many medical colleges. We do not have enough qualified teaching staff for the medical colleges. And this is due to the imbalance in the ratio of undergraduate to postgraduate seats, which is about ten to one. Because of this scarcity in the number of postgraduate seats, many graduates too are left without a chance to pursue a postgraduate degree."

Without increasing the current number of postgraduate seats, MBBS graduates will continue to suffer from a lack of employment and the medical colleges will suffer from teacher shortages. If there isn't the possibility of any increase in the number of postgraduate seats or government jobs, maybe it's time for the concerned authorities to consider if we should reduce the number of undergraduates being admitted in our medical colleges every year and reduce the number of medical colleges altogether.

**Names have been changed upon request for privacy.*

Mehrab Jamee is an activist at Sandhani, a fifthh year student of Mugda Medical College, and writes to keep himself sane. Reach him at mehrabjamee@gmail.com

DIU and Global Law Thinkers Society partner to tackle climate change, empower youth leadership

Daffodil International University (DIU) and the Global Law Thinkers Society (GLTS) have formed a strategic partnership aimed at addressing some of the world's most pressing challenges: climate change, youth leadership, and the advancement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This collaboration, which focuses on pivotal areas such as climate finance, climate justice, and loss and damage, marks a significant step toward fostering global cooperation and youth-driven action. DIU and GLTS are also preparing to participate in major international climate platforms, including COP29 in Baku, Azerbaijan.

The partnership agreement was formally signed by Dr Mohammed Nadir Bin Ali, Registrar of DIU, and Dr Mahfuza Parveen, Director of the Division of Research, DIU, along with Raoman Smita, President of GLTS, and Ahsanul Alam John, General Secretary of GLTS. Also present at the signing ceremony were Prof. Dr Mostafa Kamal, Dean, Academic Affairs, DIU, Khalid Md. Bahauddin, Assistant Professor, FGS, DIU and Mohammad Monir Hossain, Deputy Director, University Ranking Cell (URC), FGS, DIU.

This partnership is set to amplify youth leadership on climate change through joint research initiatives, workshops, training, and active participation in both national and international climate forums. A key focus will be their coordinated efforts at UNFCCC COP & SB Conferences, where they will advocate for actionable policies and concrete measures addressing the climate crisis. It will also support broader SDG initiatives, promoting environmental sustainability, peace, justice, and global education. Both DIU and GLTS aim to make significant contributions to these global goals, reinforcing Bangladesh's role in the fight against climate change

Smita emphasised the impact of the collaboration: "This partnership will not only empower youth but also solidify our joint contributions to the global climate agenda. Together with DIU, we are committed to driving substantial progress in the areas of climate finance, justice, and sustainable development."

Dr Ali highlighted the university's commitment to addressing the climate crisis, stating, "At DIU, we believe that higher education institutions have a crucial role to play in tackling climate change. Through our education, research and sustainability initiatives, we are preparing the next generation of leaders who will champion environmental stewardship and sustainable practices globally."

BANGLADESH'S IFTY BECOMES 1ST RUNNER-UP AT IEEE R10-HTC 2024 INNOVATION CHALLENGE

SUBORNO BARUA

Project AgriSage Tech by Rashedul Arefin Ifty from Bangladesh secured the 1st runner-up position at the 12th IEEE Region 10 (Asia-Pacific Region) - Humanitarian Technology Conference 2024 Innovation Challenge held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia on October 1.

Ifty, a student of Computer Science and Engineering (CSE) at International Islamic University Chittagong (IIUC), was the sole participant from Bangladesh who advanced through the finals as one of the top three finalists from more than 500 applicants and over 75 accepted projects from all over the ten IEEE Asia-Pacific regions. His AgriSage Tech empowers farmers with weather prediction capabilities, assists in determining proper land use for crop cultivation, and helps predict appropriate harvest periods through a mobile app.

The app combines machine learning algorithms to predict weather and is one of the first of its kind to use machine learning technology in agriculture. The project is still a prototype and when completed, it will provide farmers with technology to plan their crop cultivation according to the weather. Drastic changes in weather can also be easily predicted and preventive measures can be taken accordingly before natural calamities.

Suborno Barua is the Campus Ambassador for The Daily Star from International Islamic University Chittagong (IIUC).

On-campus internship recruitment connects CSE students with major IT sector employers

The Department of Computer Science and Engineering (CSE) of Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB), in collaboration with JUKTI, the official club of CSE, organised the "On-Campus Internship Recruitment Program" from September 23 to 26.

The programme, held at the IUB Library, aimed to connect students with the country's top information technology (IT) firms, offering them internship opportunities that could potentially lead to full-time employment.

A total of 51 students were interviewed by recruiters from nine leading IT companies, who offered roles such as game, web, front-end, and back-end developers. Each of the 51 participants met the mandatory requirement of completing at least 110 credit hours to qualify for the programme and attended a training course, which included 15 intensive sessions on technical and soft skills.

The nine companies were: Contessa Solutions and Consultants Limited, mPower Social Enterprises Ltd., Digicon Telecommunication Ltd., STARDUST Telecom Ltd., Brac IT, Bdtask Limited, Creative IT, Genuine Technology,

and FunFuse Games LLC.

Javed Hosein, Member of the IUB Board of Trustees, said, "The venue for this event perfectly complements our mission, with excellent facilities and gracious guests. I take pride in our students' humility and politeness, reflecting the values of one of the top private universities in the country. As we enhance our faculty by hiring PhD holders with impressive publications and industry experience, I encourage our students to stay abreast of emerging technologies like artificial intelligence."

Habib Bin Muzaffar, PhD, Dean (Acting) of the School of Engineering Technology and Sciences, said, "This is an excellent initiative that will help CSE and CSC graduates of IUB secure employment more easily. Additionally, it will strengthen Industry-Academia collaboration."

Saadia Binte Alam, PhD, Associate Professor and Head of the CSE Department, said, "I am thrilled to see our students engaging with industry leaders during the On-Campus Internship Recruitment Program. This event is vital for their growth, helping them grasp industry expectations. While many displayed strong academic abilities, the feedback indicates a need for better soft skills and practical knowledge. It's inspiring to witness their enthusiasm to bridge these gaps and emerge as confident candidates."

By the end of the event, many students had secured internships, and several companies expressed interest in hiring for full-time positions in the future.

EDU GUIDE

Your guide to the British Council Women in STEM Scholarship

MOURI HOQUE NADIA

Growing up in Darjeeling, I attended Mount Hermon School, a boarding school in the city, as part of a family tradition. My upbringing, living far from home, nurtured my love for learning and extracurricular activities (ECAs). I then returned to my family in Bangladesh and attended school at Scholastica. My academic journey eventually led me to BRAC University (BRACU), where I earned my undergraduate degree in Computer Science.

My love for coding, discovered during my A levels, and my enthusiasm for mathematics and problem-solving guided my path. I was an active member of the university's robotics club and went on to pursue internships at Robi Axiata Limited, and then at Banglalink Digital Communications Ltd., eventually securing a position as a big data specialist engineer over there.

These industry experiences fuelled my desire to return to academia and pursue a master's degree. Discovering the British Council Women in STEM Scholarship motivated me to take the next step in my academic interests.

Why the British Council Women in STEM Scholarship?

The British Council Women in STEM Scholarship aims to address the gender imbalance in STEM – science, technology, engineering, and mathematics – fields. Educating and hiring more women in STEM can lead to better scientific and financial outcomes, enhancing diversity and bringing a variety of perspectives and ideas.

During my professional days, I was the only woman in the big data team and have always been one of the few girls in almost every room I entered, whether it was my university's robotics club or any other professional experience that I had.

I was, however, fortunate to be mentored by two strong women in the corporate industry through mentorship programmes offered by Grameenphone and Banglalink. This inspired me to set an example for other women in this field.

The application process

You can start your application process for the British Council Women in STEM Scholarship as early as January when the application portal opens. Deadlines for applications differ according to the university. As per the 2024 scholarship application dates, the earliest deadline is around late March while the latest is near the end of April. These deadlines, however, may vary from year to year, so it's important to stay updated with the scholarship or British Council website.

Before you can apply for the scholarship, you first need to have an unconditional offer from one of the listed universities offering this scholarship in partnership with the British Council. This means you will need to meet all the initial conditions set by the university when you apply, such as previous degree certificates and English language certificates.

Typically, you need to write two essays: one for the university to attain the offer letter and one for the scholarship application. An important aspect to keep in mind is that this scholarship is provided with the expectation that the recipient will return to their home country after completing their degree to serve in the STEM field for a minimum of two years.

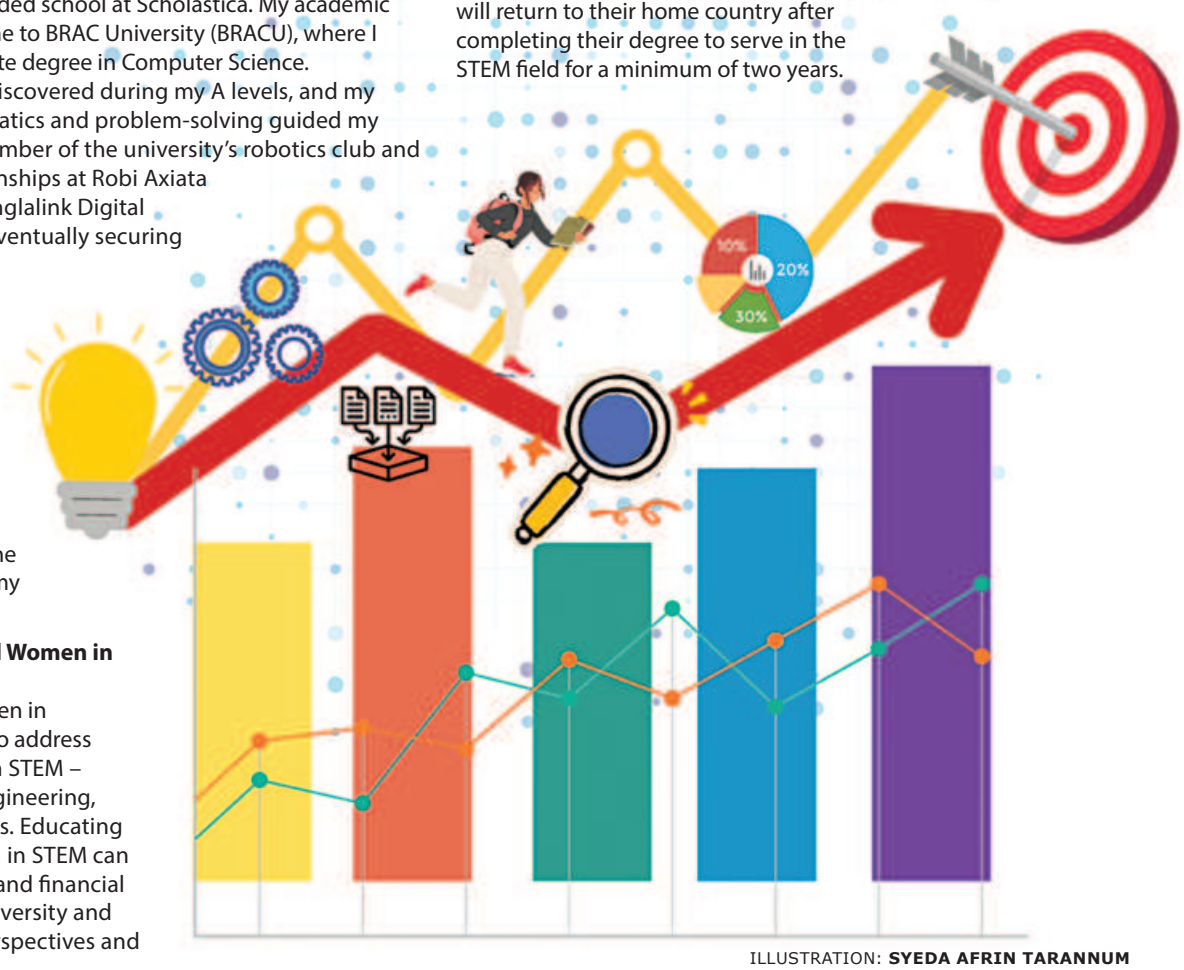


ILLUSTRATION: **SYEDA AFRIN TARANNUM**

My suggestions for a stellar application

For a great application, I suggest being proactive in your preferred STEM field. What helped me here was the fact that I had worked for a year as a big data engineer at Banglalink and also served as the assistant director of BRACU's robotics club. I also worked as a student mentor and tutor during my undergraduate studies at BRACU and was active in robotics competitions and events and even anchored international events during my free time. Given that I was constantly active in such STEM-related fields and activities, it helped me showcase how dedicated I was towards the field.

Also, more than just maintaining good grades, it's important to show a genuine interest in your specific STEM field and be your authentic self. In my application, I outlined my specific goals, divided into small milestones leading to a larger goal within a realistic timeline. I even reached out to previous recipients of the scholarship through LinkedIn to proofread my essay. I ensured that my claims were backed by statistics and proper references.

Finally, I personally believe that before gaining anything, one must give their best and enjoy the journey. The result is not the focus but can be inevitable because when you enjoy the journey, you have a good story to tell, and storytelling is everything.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

UNIVERSITY

University of Southampton, England

PROGRAMME

Master of Science (MSc) in Data and Decision Analytics, funded by the British Council under the British Council Women in STEM Scholarship programme

PREVIOUS PROGRAMME AND UNIVERSITY

Bachelor of Science (BSc) in Computer Science from BRAC University; Graduated with a CGPA of 3.73 on a scale of 4.00; High Distinction

HOBBY

Swimming, dancing, and anything to do with robotics

ILLUSTRATION: **ABIR HOSSAIN**

EDUCATION

The Indian visa debacle and the many dreams thwarted

The past three months have been a tremendously difficult time for our country and there have been far-reaching repercussions for people from all walks of life. The revolution was a necessity. But it's also natural that, due to a domino effect, there have been certain negative impacts on many people's lives. This has been the case for many prospective Bangladeshi international students travelling to different countries.

ADRITA ZAIMA ISLAM

For students travelling to countries like the US, the problem was the closure of the country's embassy itself which resulted in all student visa applications getting delayed. For others, like students travelling to different European countries like Finland, Romania, and the Czech Republic, the situation was vastly different. These countries don't have an embassy in Bangladesh. The students have to travel to a third country with an operational embassy – India for most cases – to submit their residence permit or visa application and to verify their identity.

Since the recent political instability, however, the Indian Visa Application Centre (IVAC) has been closed. For a while, they halted their operations but attempted to continue operations at a limited scale. The process, however, was disrupted following protests at the centres. At the time of writing this article, no Indian visas are being issued for Bangladeshis except for emergency and medical needs. The initial stopping of operations meant that any student who applied for a visa to travel to India for facing an embassy appointment couldn't receive their visa on time, had their visa rejected, or had their passport returned to them without having their visa processed at all. All of this prevented them from travelling to their universities for the start of their studies.

The added hurdle is that it is really hard to get an appointment at the embassies of these countries in India. They usually serve the citizens of multiple neighbouring countries like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives as well as their own citizens. Some diplomatic missions, like the Finnish mission in New Delhi, use VFS Global, a visa and passport outsourcing company, to aid in this process.

While the use of VFS makes the process relatively smooth, the waiting lists for the appointment slots are still extremely long. When slots do open up, the number of available dates is excruciatingly low. Thus, for students who missed their embassy appointment date due to problems with their Indian visa, acquiring another appointment at a later date becomes difficult. Even if they did manage to get another appointment, there would still be no guarantee of obtaining an Indian visa on time.

As a student who was supposed to arrive at Aalto University in Finland for the start of my Bachelor's degree in late August, I was thrown into this very turmoil. It was a hauntingly terrifying time: my life and future suddenly looked incredibly uncertain. I didn't know when the situation was going to normalise or when I could start my new academic and social life. I spent hours poring over the IVAC website, maddeningly trying to contact any person with any semblance of connection to the visa centre – hoping that I could get to Finland on time. Moreover, there appeared to be no alternative to travelling to India which I found out after contacting Finnish immigration and the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs.

For 19-year-old Tafhimul Hasan, the situation proved to be doubly upsetting. He said, "I got admission offers from two European universities: one for Computer Science at Charles University in Czechia and another for Quantum Technology at Aalto University in Finland. If things went according to plan, I would have arrived at Aalto on August 26 or at Charles University on September 26."

Due to the absence of both Finnish and Czech embassies in Bangladesh, he needed to travel to New Delhi to apply for a residence permit. The Indian visa process, however, turned out to be a particularly infuriating obstacle.

"My father and I applied for Indian tourist visas in early May. My father got his visa, but I didn't. I applied again for a double-entry visa twice afterwards, but it was rejected both times. Despite submitting all the required documents – like my admission offer, scholarship letter, VFS appointment, and bank statements – I wasn't given any clear reason for the refusals," he added. "With the situation in Bangladesh becoming unstable, I applied for a general tourist visa on July 28, but on August 26, I got my passport back without a visa."

After having gone through this entire horrific experience, I feel somewhat angered and confused. So many students from Bangladesh travel to these European countries for their higher studies every year. Why are there no embassies processing the paperwork here? Why could no other provisions be made for Bangladeshi students in different countries like Nepal or Thailand where the arrival process is relatively simple, and which have the relevant embassies for processing our documents? Why didn't the Foreign Ministry of Bangladesh step in so students didn't have to suffer so much just to obtain the proper documentation to start their higher education?

"At first, I was stressed and anxious about everything, but after four months of dealing with this, I'm just disappointed now. I don't know who to blame or what to do. I just hope the new interim government will take responsibility and sort things out so everything can go back to normal," concludes Tahfimul. I find myself to be on the same wavelength.

Reference:

Dhaka Tribune. (September 30, 2024). *No Indian visa issuance for Bangladeshis except for medical, emergency cases.*

Zaima is barely a student these days.