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The role of higher education institutions in attracting global talent

ILLUSTRATION:
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to start offering PhDs, no progress has been made on that front. Moreover, given the country's poor research environment, the quality of the pre-existing research programmes is not ideal. Not to mention, there are no post-doctorate programmes in the country at all. Students who want to pursue PhDs, post-doctorates, and subsequent careers in academia are left with no choice but to turn to foreign countries to fulfil their educational aspirations.

Moreover, students may feel that there is a gap in terms of the quality of education they are receiving and the exorbitant fees they are paying for their degree. Due to the limited number of seats available as compared to the number of students vying for those seats, the competition for public university education is cutthroat, to put it lightly. One of the reasons why students want to attend public institutions rather than private ones is due to the high cost of a private university degree. According to the government's 2022 Household Income and Expenditure Survey, the average household income in Bangladesh is BDT 32,422 per month. Thus, paying 10 to 20 lakhs for a degree seems outlandish to many. Many talented students might feel that it is more worth it to find fully-funded degree opportunities abroad, rather than squandering the money on a local degree that is likely to be sub-par.

As the failings of the tertiary education environment are a major driving force behind brain drain, it is a logical progression to suggest that solving these issues can be massively beneficial to reversing the tide of brain drain. Amina Khatun, Assistant Professor of Mass Communication and Journalism at the University of Dhaka, opines, "By addressing the problematic areas, our public and private universities could enhance the academic landscape and enable graduates to remain in the country."

She continues, "Firstly, universities have to ensure quality education with updated curricula that align more closely with international standards. Educators have to begin emphasising critical thinking and problem-solving over rote memorisation."

A more practical approach to education will not only enrich educational experiences for students, it will also prepare them for employment. The dearth of job opportunities and unlikelihood of job security contribute significantly to brain drain. Thus, proper career counselling services within these universities that can provide students with comprehensive guidance about their post-graduation life will undoubtedly be helpful. Students can become more informed about the possible career options they have and envision a fulfilling professional life in Bangladesh, forgoing the decision to move abroad for better job prospects.

Additionally, by developing connections with local companies and employers, universities can aid students in two critical ways—providing them with internship opportunities to gain hands-on knowledge of the field they are interested in and creating pathways for them in terms of job placements and networking. It is also necessary to consult alumni, field experts, and employers when setting a curriculum to ensure that it can translate into desirable outcomes for graduates.

Hiring more educators, particularly educators who are highly knowledgeable about the field they are teaching is a necessity. Students don't require someone who simply tells them what is already written in the textbooks; they require mentorship and encouragement. A problem that many people have with Bangladeshi universities is the hostile or unfriendly attitude of many of the educators employed. That, coupled with problems caused by political interference, deters students from attending these institutions. Authority figures must take it upon themselves to ensure the quality of hire as well as proper behaviour from their faculty through equity committees, student council bodies, etc.

Bahreen Khan further says, "As the financial burden can be a barrier for many, an increase in scholarship access from private universities can mean that many talented students may take up local opportunities rather than pursue scholarships abroad."

Increasing research opportunities will be more difficult, but it is a task that must be tackled if we want to keep our strongest academic minds. There are no alternatives to investments in research. The government and individual institutions must take the initiative to develop research laboratories, acquire proper equipment, borrow foreign-born qualified educators, or send their own faculty members abroad for appropriate training so that proper research facilities can be provided and PhDs can be awarded on a greater scale. Amina Khatun says, "University authorities may take the initiative with several national and international organisations to collaborate in research programmes. This could help retain graduates passionate about pursuing academic careers locally."

As long as the research environment in the country does not improve, academics won't have an incentive to stay here. Besides, ensuring comparable pay, sufficient funding, an atmosphere conducive to cutting-edge research, and properly tenured positions can go a long way towards not only retaining students but also attracting highly skilled expat academics back into the country.

Investments in innovative, digital teaching methods, learning materials, and more diverse programmes of study are crucial, too, if we hope to stop talented individuals passionate about niche subjects from leaving. Tarnima Warda Andalib, Assistant Professor at BRAC Business School, opines, "Universities need to act like academic institutions and not like corporate organisations. Knowledge should be available everywhere with plenty of subjects and up-to-date syllabi and facilities."

However, the burden is not on these educational institutions alone. Bangladesh's tertiary education sector needs a complete makeover if it ever wants to stop the brain drain. That scale of remodelling has to start from a policy level. The government has to collaborate with policy-makers, intellectuals, academics, industry experts, and students to redesign higher educational institutions in Bangladesh so that they can stop the flight of human capital.

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