

# BANGLADESHI UNIVERSITIES IN DECLINE

## Why teacher recruitment must change now



### HASINUR RAHMAN KHAN

Bangladesh today has 171 universities—55 public and 116 private. In less than five decades, the number of higher education institutions has grown more than tenfold. Yet the explosion in quantity has not translated into quality. In the QS World University Rankings 2025, only two Bangladeshi universities, Dhaka University and BUET, appear in the 800–1000 bracket, while none make it to the top 500. In the Times Higher Education rankings, Bangladesh is entirely absent from the global list and performs poorly even in Asia. By contrast, India has 45 universities in the global ranking tables, Pakistan has six, and Sri Lanka two.

### THE REGIONAL REALITY

India, with over 1,100 universities, made a PhD mandatory for assistant professor posts more than a decade ago. Its University Grants Commission (UGC) requires candidates to pass the National Eligibility Test (NET), ensuring that even at the entry level, teachers have both depth and breadth. Institutions like the IITs and IIMs have thrived under this model, climbing into global rankings and producing graduates who lead in technology and business worldwide.

Pakistan's Higher Education Commission, formed in 2002, tied faculty recruitment to doctoral training and research output. Thousands of scholars were funded to pursue PhDs abroad, many of whom returned to strengthen Pakistan's universities. Today, institutions such as Quaid-i-Azam University consistently outrank Bangladeshi universities.

Despite the rapid expansion of universities, recruitment policies remain frozen in outdated and, in many cases, politicised practices. It is a quiet crisis that undermines every attempt to lift higher education to global standards.

Take the example of recent recruitment rules at Jahangirnagar University, as reported in an editorial in *Banik Barta* on September 22, 2025. Candidates were to be scored based on SSC and HSC results, with 15 marks reserved for these high-school grades, while a PhD—a qualification universally recognised as the foundation of university teaching—earned only 5 marks. In Dhaka University's Urdu department last year, a PhD holder with excellent undergraduate and postgraduate results was disqualified simply because his SSC marks fell short of a threshold. This inversion of priorities is not just absurd; it is destructive. It tells a generation of young scholars that world-class research matters less than their teenage exam results.

Worse still, the written exam process for recruiting lecturers in many universities, introduced recently, reduces the selection of future academics to a low-level, rote-based test. Candidates are often asked long or short questions similar to those given in school, college, or university-leaving exams. These exams:

Do not evaluate research ability, critical thinking, or teaching potential. Favour memorisation over creativity, reinforcing exactly the kind of education universities should be moving away from.

Allow scope for manipulation, since grading is opaque and often influenced by internal politics.

Discourage internationally trained PhD holders, or even nationally trained ones, who find it insulting to prove their worth through tests designed for undergraduates rather than scholars.

In most countries, academic recruitment involves evaluating a candidate's PhD research, publications in peer-reviewed journals, teaching philosophy, and research presentation before peers and external experts. In Bangladesh, by contrast, a brilliant PhD from Cambridge or Tokyo might be asked to sit through a two-hour exam testing textbook definitions, while someone with connections or the right SSC marks could sail through.

Bangladesh is not unique in its struggles, but it is increasingly an outlier in South Asia and far behind global standards. To see why, we must first look at how others do it.

### THE BANGLADESHI PICTURE: SALARIES, FACILITIES, TRAINING, CULTURES

The reality at home is sobering. Under the 2015 National Pay Scale, a newly appointed lecturer in a public university starts with a basic salary of 35,500 taka (9th grade). With allowances, the monthly take-home rises to roughly 45,000–50,000 taka. An assistant professor (grade 8) earns about 50,000–70,000 taka, while associate professors (grade 6) may draw 80,000–95,000 taka. A full professor (grade 4) can expect a total package of 1,00,000–1,15,000 taka, sometimes slightly higher with senior allowances. Even at the very top, these salaries rarely exceed 1,30,000 taka per month.

Put in perspective, a mid-level manager in a private telecom company or commercial bank in Dhaka easily earns 2–3 lakh taka monthly, while fresh IT graduates at multinational firms often start above a public university lecturer's salary. The gap is stark, and it explains why many bright graduates hesitate to enter academia, and why PhD holders abroad often

ability to secure competitive grants. Professors at public universities often earn the equivalent of 7–9 lakh taka per month, with substantial access to European Union research funds and sabbatical opportunities.

In Asia, Singapore's NUS and NTU openly recruit PhDs from top global universities, offering salaries often exceeding 10 lakh taka per month, housing benefits, and guaranteed research grants. China, too, has made aggressive reforms: Peking and Tsinghua Universities now recruit globally, demanding publication in top-tier journals as a condition of hiring and offering return packages to attract Chinese PhDs from the US and Europe. Faculty salaries have risen sharply in the past two decades, and universities compete to provide housing, research assistants,

choose not to return.

Research support is equally disappointing. According to University Grants Commission (UGC) reports, most public universities allocate on average less than 1% of their annual budget for research. At Dhaka University, the country's premier institution, the research allocation per faculty member often falls below 50,000–75,000 taka a year, barely enough to conduct a small field survey or pay for journal submission fees. Laboratory-based disciplines fare even worse, with outdated equipment and little prospect of replenishment. International travel funds, conference grants, or start-up research packages that are routine in developed countries are virtually absent.

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### TOWARDS A NEW MODEL

If Bangladesh is serious about building universities that can compete globally, reforming recruitment is non-negotiable. Several changes are urgent:

**PhD as the baseline:** No appointment should be made at the lecturer or assistant professor level without a PhD, except in rare professional disciplines such as fine arts or law where global practice differs.

**Research-weighted criteria:** At least 50 percent of recruitment evaluation should depend on international publications, research projects, patents, and citations. A candidate with a PhD from a globally ranked university and Q1 publications must outrank one with only good SSC marks.

**Transparent committees:** Recruitment boards must include external experts, ideally from outside Bangladesh, to reduce local bias. Open seminars or teaching demonstrations by shortlisted candidates should be mandatory.

**Public disclosure:** Candidate lists, evaluation criteria, and final scores must be published online for full transparency.

**Link pay to research:** Salaries should be raised to regional competitive levels, at least tripling current scales. Research allowances, housing, health insurance, and sabbaticals must be built into contracts.

**Capacity building:** Structured training programmes for early-career faculty should cover pedagogy, research methods, grant writing, and digital teaching tools. Mid-career faculty should have access to postdoctoral training and sabbatical opportunities.

**Internationalisation of recruitment:** Universities should actively recruit foreign faculty or Bangladeshi diaspora PhDs, offering competitive salaries and research facilities. Joint appointments with international universities should be encouraged.

**Diversity and inclusion:** Recruitment policies must ensure gender balance, representation of minorities, and fair opportunities for all candidates. Countries like Canada and the UK

have shown that inclusive hiring strengthens institutional reputation.

**Academic freedom and autonomy:** Candidates should be assured freedom of thought and independence from partisan pressures. Strong faculty governance, as practised in the US and Europe, helps protect this principle.

**Digital infrastructure for hiring:** Recruitment applications, evaluations, and interviews should be digitised and archived, minimising human manipulation. Remote interviews can also allow international experts to participate at low cost.

**Global benchmarking of promotions:** Promotion should depend not on seniority but on measurable research impact, teaching evaluations, and service to the academic community. Scopus-indexed publications, citation counts, and international collaboration should be weighted.

**Accountability through audits:** An independent national academic audit body should review recruitment decisions annually, flagging irregularities and publishing findings publicly.

**Link to national priorities:** Recruitment should also prioritise expertise in areas critical for Bangladesh's future—climate science, artificial intelligence, public health, and energy—so that universities directly serve the country's development goals.

### WHY REFORM CANNOT WAIT

Some will claim that Bangladesh cannot afford sweeping reforms in teacher recruitment. The harsher truth is that we cannot afford not to. Without competent, research-active faculty, our universities will remain little more than factories of certificates, producing graduates unfit for global competition. The ambition of transforming into a knowledge-driven economy will collapse under the weight of mediocrity.

Universities are meant to be engines of national transformation. Stanford's faculty helped give birth to Silicon Valley. Peking and Tsinghua drive China's innovation machine. Even in our own neighbourhood, India's IITs and IIMs nurture the engineers and managers who now lead Google, Microsoft, and global corporations.

Bangladesh's universities can and must play a similar role, but only if we dare to recruit teachers based on merit, research, and vision rather than connections and convenience. The cost of inaction is nothing less than the slow strangulation of our future. The time to reform is not tomorrow, not next year, but now.

Bangladesh now stands at a crossroads. One path leads to the comfort of the old order—nepotism, underinvestment, and policies that reward mediocrity. The other demands courage: to embrace global best practices, to value research and merit above all else, and to make teacher recruitment the true foundation of excellence in higher education.

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A jam-packed classroom at Dhaka University in the 1960s. Martyred intellectual Mufazzal Haider Chaudhury — a prominent Bengali essayist, prized scholar of Bengali literature, educator, and linguist — is seen delivering a lecture at the Arts Faculty. This powerful image recalls a time when great minds inspired generations.

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