

The China pivot for students merits attention



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

Dr Shamsad Mortuza
is professor of English at Dhaka
University.

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

"Seek knowledge even if you have to go to China"—this popular saying is fast becoming a reality for our students. A recent claim by the Chinese ambassador confirms that 20,000 Bangladeshi students are currently studying in China. However, many of the Western datasets do not include this figure. The Unesco website updated in 2024 mentions 52,799 students and offers a top ten list featuring the US (8,524), the UK (6,586), Canada (5,835), Malaysia (5,714), Germany (5,046), Australia (4,987), Japan (2,802), India (2,606), South Korea (1,202) and Saudi Arabia (1,190). ICFES also has a similar list with different ranks and higher figures, claiming the UAE as the number one destination for Bangladeshi students, followed by Malaysia.

China does not appear in any of these lists. Yet, the country has been strategically investing to become a target for higher education, especially for students from the Global South. According to the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, quoted by Chinese American chemist Peidong Yang, China is the top destination in Asia for international students. In 2018, it accounted for 10 percent of the global market (*Handbook on Migration to China*, p. 9) and welcomed 492,000 international students. This is far below the 1.1 million students going to the US or 670,000 students going to the UK (Unesco TNE trackers). However, the rise of international students in China tells a lot about the changing educational landscape. This data is further complemented by the number of Chinese universities ranked by the international students.

During my recent visit to China as a fellow at the Shanghai Institutes of International Studies (SIIS), I experienced the phenomenal growth of the universities. Having studied both in the UK and the US, I could understand why there is a major shift unfolding in our region with the pivot of Bangladeshi students toward the East. I talked to several Bangladeshi expatriate teachers and students to understand what China now offers to Global South learners, notwithstanding our policy imagination



VISUAL: MONOROM POLOK

that has remained static. My visits, starting from the medical units to the aeronautical and geographic information system (GIS) infrastructures of over five universities, made me aware of how China is leapfrogging into a future where education, technology, and culture blend seamlessly.

At the East China Normal University, I asked officials whether there was a decline in the humanities with so much emphasis presently given to STEM. They were proud to say that 40 percent of their students were in the humanities. Yet this is the same university that has the world's leading tech ventures hosting 1,400 companies—including Intel, Microsoft, and Coke—on its industrial park.

new culture, everyone seemed quite upbeat. They all appreciated the welcoming nature of Chinese culture. The respondents I spoke with identified three pull factors. First, China excels in fields such as AI, robotics, renewable energy, pharmacy, traditional medicine, and logistics. These fields align directly with Bangladesh's development needs. Many of the students are attracted to the language programmes, knowing that in the evolving world, this linguistic competency can be a capital for future employability. Second, many of these students have come through the Chinese Government Scholarship (CSC), provincial scholarships, and full university funding, which do not require them to do

gentler social transition. However, since the trend is very recent, there is no strong alumni output to understand how these degrees are changing the lives of Bangladeshi students.

I realised my own biases were creating a blind spot. This oversight, shared by the country, shows something important: the common belief is that students from developing nations always "look West" for education, but the trend is shifting eastward towards countries like China, Malaysia, and the UAE. The oversight is likely to have policy consequences. Bangladesh's education planners must reconsider where its human resources can and should be directed and what kind of language and cultural training,

as well as reintegration pathways, they should incorporate in the curriculum to address this mobility shift.

According to the pilot survey I did for my fellowship, most of the students have completed the HSK test in Chinese language proficiency to study in undergraduate programmes. Most of them are studying computing/AI, the fastest-growing sector in both Bangladesh and China. Most come through university scholarships. Such activity indicates the emergence of a new pipeline of young and skilled, China-educated professionals. For the postgraduate students, the responses were slightly varied: five hoped to stay in China for work or further study; three aspired to move to a third country (often in the West); two planned to return to Bangladesh; and two aimed for entrepreneurship. The pattern can be interpreted not with the traditional lens of brain drain but through the brain gain nexus, which involves a more dynamic exchange of skills, networks, and technologies flowing between countries.

However, this journey is not without barriers. The main challenge faced by our students involves the language issue. Even in English-taught programmes, everyday life demands language skills. Students must use VPN to remain connected to their friends back home, as China insists on its homegrown digital systems (Alipay, WeChat). The other concern that these students shared involved the lack of familiarity of Bangladeshi employers with Chinese degrees. Without systematic recognition of Chinese credentials, returnees may struggle to prove their value. China's work-visa pathway for international graduates, though improving, remains competitive and often uncertain.

For Bangladesh to leverage China-trained talent, it must prepare mechanisms to absorb, certify, and deploy these returnees into sectors that need them most, including AI, renewable energy, pharmaceuticals, supply chain, and public health. Bangladeshi universities should also do curriculum mapping to understand the merit of Chinese degrees, especially in STEM and health sciences. The University Grants Commission (UGC) can create structured reintegration pathways and degree equivalency tools. Building institutional partnerships (dual degrees, credit transfers, and co-supervised PhDs) can enhance the South-South cooperation needed for our ranking efforts, while Bangladesh-China alumni forums can coordinate policy, mobility, and research collaboration.

Reviving the RTI regime is essential for our democratic journey

Dr Shamsul Bari and Ruhi Naz
are chairman and deputy director (RTI),
respectively, at Research Initiatives,
Bangladesh (RIB). They can be reached at rib@ctech-bd.com.

SHAMSUL BARI and RUHI NAZ

Despite widespread public outcry for over a year, Bangladesh's Right to Information (RTI) regime remains stuck in a deadlock. Its consequences are becoming harder to ignore. Frustration is mounting among those who have long supported the law and used it as a means to hold public authorities accountable. For more than fifteen years, civil society organisations have patiently nurtured a community of RTI users. Their numbers were never large, but their dedication kept the law alive. Through small, steady efforts, they showed all the power of disclosure and the democratic promise embedded in the RTI Act.

However, that momentum has slowed sharply. In recent months, civil society activity around the law has diminished, applications have dropped, and fresh examples of successful RTI usage have become rare. The Information Commission, long the centrepiece of enforcement, remains dormant. Whether it will be revived under the interim government remains uncertain. Promised amendments to strengthen the law have also stalled. In this climate, hopes now rest on political parties preparing for the forthcoming national elections: will they commit to safeguarding and revitalising RTI as a democratic instrument?

As we await political clarity, it seems timely to step back and examine the broader picture: what has the RTI movement achieved globally, why do these laws so often struggle with implementation, and what lessons does Bangladesh need to heed?

Over the last three decades, RTI laws have been adopted in over 130 countries. They aim to transform the state from an opaque administrative fortress to an institution answerable to the people. But implementation has been uneven across continents.

Bureaucratic resistance remains the most significant barrier. Many officials still consider public information to be their personal domain, not the public's. Such tendencies are particularly strong in

post-colonial bureaucracies, where administrative culture was built on hierarchy and control. Even mature democracies are not immune to it—studies show persistent delays, excessive redactions, and misuse of exemptions in the UK and Canada.

Weak institutional capacity also undermines RTI. Without organised record-keeping, trained officers, and digital infrastructure, disclosure becomes slow and unreliable. Vague exemptions—such as "national security" or "public order"—are frequently used to deny uncomfortable requests. Low public awareness keeps RTI in the hands of journalists and activists rather than ordinary citizens. Oversight bodies are often underfunded and lack real enforcement authority. Add to this the risk of intimidation faced by many RTI users, and it becomes clear why implementation gaps persist worldwide. The lesson is simple: an RTI law can change rules, but not mindsets—and mindsets are where secrecy lies.

Bangladesh's RTI Act, passed in 2009, was a democratic breakthrough. It recognised information as a public right, created an independent Information Commission, and signalled that transparency was essential to accountable governance. Civil society played a central role in training citizens and demonstrating, through practical use, how RTI could expose corruption in land offices, improve delivery of social safety nets, and correct administrative injustices.

Progress came steadily. The use of the law moved from the personal domain to more national issues. Public officials were trained; designated officers were appointed to respond to information requests, however haltingly; and public bodies began responding to requests. The achievements were small but meaningful.

But entrenched challenges never disappeared—and some have sharpened in recent years. The culture of secrecy continues to dominate public administration. Officials often discourage applications or let deadlines lapse. Record management remains weak, with most files still maintained manually. The application of exemption clauses remains broad and inconsistent. Proactive disclosure is sporadic and often limited to outdated, English-only websites. And RTI users face pressure or harassment when exploring sensitive issues. The

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Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh
Local Government Engineering Department
Office of the Executive Engineer
District: Tangail
www.lged.gov.bd

Memo No. 46.02.9300.000.01.014.25-6448

Date: 13-11-25

e-Tender Notice No.27/2025-2026 [OTM/OSTETM]

e-Tender is invited in the National e-GP System Portal (<http://www.eprocure.gov.bd>) for the procurement of following works.

SL No.	Tender ID No.	Name of Scheme	Package No	Last Selling Date & Time of e-tender Document	Closing & Opening Date & Time of Submission e-Tender Document	Remarks (OTM/ OSTETM)
1	1168512	Periodic Maintenance of Kalihati (Dhunai)-Shayhat-Hatia JBA Road from Ch.00m-3640m Under Upazila: Kalihati, District: Tangail (Road ID No.393472001)	LGED/ GOBM/ Tang/25-26/RW-60	07-12-2025 & 16.00pm	08-12-2025 & 15.00pm	OTM
2	1168513	Periodic Maintenance of Elenga GC-Bolla GC Road from Ch.8000m-13150m Under Upazila: Kalihati, District: Tangail (Road ID No.393472005)	LGED/ GOBM/ Tang/25-26/RW-61	07-12-2025 & 16.00pm	08-12-2025 & 15.00pm	OTM
3	1168517	Rehabilitation of Barachowna-Kalihati via Chakpara Road from Ch.5000m-10130m Under Upazila: Shakhipur, District: Tangail (Road ID No.393852009)	LGED/ GOBM/ Tang/25-26/RW-65	07-12-2025 & 16.00pm	08-12-2025 & 15.00pm	OTM
4	1140133	Rehabilitation of Nagarpur RHD-Shahjani GC Road via Goyhata UPC Office Road from Ch.00-4500m Under Nagarpur Upazila, District: Tangail (Road ID No.393762002)	CAFDRIRP/ Tangail/UZR/W-30/FD/2023-24	07-12-2025 & 16.00pm	08-12-2025 & 15.00pm	OTM
5	1140134	Rehabilitation of Nagarpur RHD-Shahjani GC Road via Goyhata UPC Office Road from Ch.4500-8685m Under Nagarpur Upazila, District: Tangail (Road ID No.393762002)	CAFDRIRP/ Tangail/UZR/W-31/FD/2023-24	07-12-2025 & 16.00pm	08-12-2025 & 15.00pm	OTM
6	1174171	Rehabilitation of Tangail (Main Road)-Kakua Bazar via Dhalan Sibpur Bazar, Kakua UP Road from Ch.7750-8180m & Ch. 8462-12221m Under Sadar Upazila, District: Tangail (Road ID No.393953001)	CAFDRIRP/ Tangail/UNR/FD/W-52/2025-26	07-12-2025 & 16.00pm	08-12-2025 & 15.00pm	OTM
7	1161553	(a) Rehabilitation of Bhandesher GC-Dewpara GC Road via Vial Bazar Road from Ch.2380-3880m Under Kalihati Upazila, District: Tangail (Road ID No.393472006) (b) Rehabilitation of Salia UP to Mogra Bazar via Dashakia UP Road from Ch.600-5030m Under Kalihati Upazila, District: Tangail (Road ID No.393473013)	CAFDRIRP/Tangail/UZR/ER/W-53/2025-26	07-12-2025 & 16.00pm	08-12-2025 & 15.00pm	OSTETM

1. This is an online tender, where only e-Tender will be accepted in the National e-GP Portal and no offline/hard copies will be accepted.
2. To submit e-Tender, registration in the National e-GP system portal (<http://www.eprocure.gov.bd>) is required.
3. Detail about the tender have shown in e-tender notice and e-tender document.

Further information and guidelines are available in the National e-GP system Portal and from e-GP help desk (helpdesk@eprocure.gov.bd).

Mohammad Qamruzzaman
Executive Engineer
LGED, Tangail
E-mail: xen.tangail@lged.gov.bd