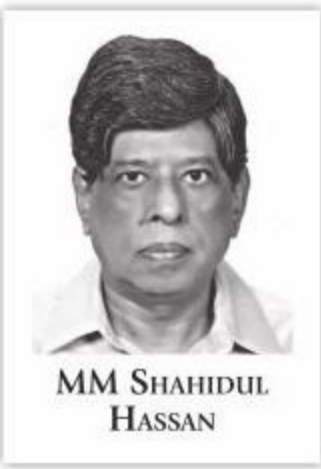


Research universities can light the way for tomorrow's Bangladesh



MM SHAHIDUL HASSAN

HIGHER education is rapidly expanding in developing countries. There were only four public universities at the time of Bangladesh's inception as a sovereign country in 1971. The country has now a total of

43 public and 103 private universities. The number of students enrolled in universities has shot up from 4,11,717 in 2008 to 10,28,314 in 2018 (BANBEIS). But what does it mean for economic development?

If universities can produce graduates having thinking and innovation skills, they will become more employable in the national and global job markets; and they will play a key role in the economic development of the country. The role of universities is to provide unique environments that prepare students to be master thinkers and able to grasp a wide array of skills and comprise the most adaptable workforce. The classroom lecture model that prevails in universities in developing countries needs to be replaced by a model of pedagogy that views the classroom as a community of learners and a place where students develop collaborative skills and share knowledge through verbal questioning, analysing and problem-solving. Universities should, therefore, undertake a transformation in teaching, learning and assessment towards educating employable or self-employable students.

In many universities, the conditions of work and levels of remuneration are not adequate, involvement in institutional governance is often limited, and the autonomy to build both an academic career and academic programmes is also

constrained. A majority or a significant minority of academics in universities, mostly in private universities and in a few public ones, holds just a bachelor's degree. However, senior academic positions almost always have people with higher academic qualifications, but much of the academic labour force has modest qualifications for their jobs. This lack of qualification creates a barrier to academic upward mobility for many junior faculty members. Also, the level of expertise possessed by many teachers is quite modest, affecting the quality and depth of the instruction provided to students. The continued increase in the number of universities and enrolment results in the requirement of a large number of new teachers, while selectivity is becoming minimal.

The enrolment growth will be almost double in a few decades. The challenge of providing teachers to instruct these students will place a severe strain on the limited capacities in the universities. Universities must make efforts to upgrade academic skills and increase capacities. A gap between the thin wedge of highly qualified personnel and the large, poor, and marginally qualified group of teachers is increasing. In many private universities, there are curious contradictions in the nature of academic appointments. Even the teachers who are hired in regular full-time positions have little formal job protection, and interestingly, few appointees are removed from their academic posts. Academic systems do not offer a tenure system that protects academic freedom or inhibits interference by university authorities in the intellectual life of the academic staff. By contrast, in public universities, where teachers are appointed in full-time positions, they can continue their service without any risk of removal from their academic posts. There are

no such tenure track positions. Universities set high qualifications including a requirement to publish a good number of research papers in world-class journals, which cannot be achieved by a marginally qualified group of teachers.

Many of the 146 universities are not actively involved in basic and innovative applied researches. In this context, establishing them as teaching-oriented institutions to meet the needs of the domestic demands of Bangladeshi society will be justifiable. While the basic role of academics everywhere is teaching, research and service, the teaching-oriented universities can appoint academics who are mainly teachers with research and service a minor part of their work. There will be another group of teachers

who are mainly researchers with teaching a minor part of their work.

The country also needs to establish research universities with the aim to produce highly-qualified PhD degree holders and innovative research. Research universities are defined as academic institutions committed to the creation and dissemination of knowledge, and featuring the appropriate laboratories, resourceful libraries, and other facilities that permit teaching and research at the highest possible level. Advanced nations have moved towards knowledge-based economies. As such, these nations no longer compete for industrial capacity or access to natural resources, but rather for skilled workers, intellectual property and knowledge

(EMBO report 2007).

Bangladesh has set itself the goal to become a developed country by 2041. So preparation should be taken to establish a knowledge-based society and economy. Research universities today work on problems that matter to people; in that sense, this is applied research. They do research on deeply intellectual problems as well, without the obvious and immediate commercial use. Given the pressure on universities to help societies become more economically competitive, universities will likely continue to work on applied research. Every research university has to balance the need to be connected with the marketplace, economy and society, with the need to do innovative and exploratory research.

Research universities are expensive and require more funding than other universities. Universities need to attract the best staff and students and to provide the infrastructure necessary for high-quality research and teaching. The "cost per student" is higher than the average across an entire system. Adequate salaries for faculty, well-equipped libraries and laboratories, and scholarships for bright but needy students are examples of the expenditures required. Bangladesh cannot afford many research universities. The government may start with two or three such universities at this stage. The government may also select a few public universities and gradually build them as research universities. Most of tomorrow's economy is being born today in university research laboratories. The contribution of research universities towards the economic growth of the country will be more recognised with the passage of time.



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