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## Unsatisfactory ranking: What can universities do to improve their performance?





Students wait in queues to enter the Central Library of Dhaka University. PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

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It came as a shock to many that no Bangladeshi university made it to the top 417 in Asia in the latest Times Higher Education ranking. This, however, should not have come as a surprise as international competitiveness of Bangladesh's best universities has been declining over the years as reflected in previous rankings. While some aspects of the criteria used may not be strictly applicable to conditions prevailing in Bangladesh, the rankings do offer a measure of a university's international competitiveness. Local and foreign students have started to take rankings into consideration in their university destination choices. Rankings also influence international funding and competitive research grants. A fall in comparative ranking is not necessarily because the standards of top Bangladeshi universities have fallen but more likely because other countries have been performing much better in research and innovation. Universities should seriously try to identify genuine shortcomings and rectify them. Because of the high cost of quality higher education, serious rethinking is also required about the burden of supporting huge numbers of tertiary students at present, and

about the perceived usefulness of four-year Bachelor's degrees and the Master's degrees as minimum requirements for entry into the higher rungs of the workforce.

About 3.8 million students are enrolled in tertiary institutions in Bangladesh, one of the highest in the world. Unfortunately, the unemployment rate among graduates is more than 30 percent. In spite of such a high unemployment rate among local graduates, the private sector cannot find employees with the right skills. This suggests a mismatch between the skills required and the reality. There is a small but healthy trend observed in recent years towards technical and vocational education which should be encouraged, and the sector is strongly supported and adequately financed. A majority of post-secondary students could be encouraged to choose this route by offering graduates a decent salary, job security and social status, and incentives for working in non-metropolitan areas.

While bigger enrolments in technical and vocational education will take the pressure off higher education placements, hundreds of thousands of students will seek places in universities and colleges without the guarantee of a desired job upon graduation. The government should initiate a serious study to determine the number of graduates required in different professions, now and over time. Besides providing information on the actual numbers of different types of professionals required, such a study will also suggest ways to restructure universities and colleges. Of the 160 or so universities, not more than 20 could be considered as institutions with some research capability, and more could join them in future. The remaining universities could take on a bigger responsibility for teaching and play a very crucial role in the training of large numbers of highly qualified teachers for all levels of education, and also required numbers of professionals in health, agriculture, technology, and other economic sectors.

Looking at a series of recent rankings, and the criteria used to determine these, it appears Bangladeshi universities are performing reasonably well in teaching, but fall awfully short in research and innovation. Experimental scientists could plead lack of adequate R&D funding and instrumentation for low research productivity, but what excuse is there for the academics in the humanities and social sciences? Research productivity remains a low priority as it plays only a marginal role in the appointment, tenure and promotion of university academics. Those who carry out research under such adverse conditions do so at their own initiative and often with highly competitive overseas grants. They should be accorded proper recognition, adequately supported and directly rewarded for demonstrated research productivity.

A resource-poor country like Bangladesh has to make use of its favourable population dividend to create intellectual capital through quality higher education, which cannot thrive without also strengthening primary and secondary

education. A productive knowledge-based economy requires the education budget to be increased to the recommended 20 percent of the annual budget, or 6 percent of GDP, with at least a quarter of that ring-fenced for higher education. Currently, less than 1 percent of the annual budget is allocated to higher education, and only a miniscule portion of that is available for research (e.g. 0.0135 percent of Dhaka University's annual budget is allocated for research). Money, without attitudinal changes, will not bring about the desired results. Huge amounts of funds have been pumped into Bangladeshi universities by the UGC through three rounds of the WB-funded HEQEP project, but any perceptible improvement in performance or ranking is yet to be seen. Funding strategies may need to be better targeted and coordinated.

Technological proficiency, needed for Bangladesh's ambitious economic goals, requires higher education to be underpinned by a very robust science and technology base, with a major emphasis on research and innovation and multisectoral collaborations supported by a vibrant postgraduate research culture and world-class research facilities. The combined national R&D budget adds up to about 0.4 percent of GDP, of which the bulk is used up on overhead expenses. To be effective, and to make up some lost ground, the R&D budget should be increased to at least 2 percent of GDP. Even this would be too small to adequately support the full range of postgraduate and other research activities in Bangladesh. Considering the cost of world-class research, and the paucity of available funds, publicly-funded research should be largely goal-oriented and aimed at product or process development with the support of industry.

Funding for goal-oriented research of national importance should be preferentially directed to a small number of multidisciplinary projects in areas of highest national priority and existing strength. To maximise the impact of available manpower and technological resources, collaborations are required between multi-institutional researchers possessing complementary expertise and facilities. Such collaborations would involve not only universities (mainly fulltime PhD and postdoctoral researchers) and industry, but also government research laboratories (such as BCSIR) to support development research and technology transfer, and proactive support from government research councils and regulatory authorities. This would be a novel concept for Bangladesh but perhaps the only way to ensure that the fruits of publicly-funded research flow on to the common man.

The different components of a national collaborative project are likely to fall under the jurisdiction of different ministries. Getting all components to work in unison would be a challenge that can be met by coordination and targeted funding at the highest level through a National Research and Innovation Council, consisting of internationally-recognised local and NRB experts and senior representatives of relevant ministries. The new leadership in the Ministry of Education and UGC could consider setting up a new section—within UGC or the proposed Higher Education Commission (HEC)—to support

postgraduate research and innovation especially in the science-oriented universities, and to also establish a National Core Facility for cutting-edge technologies critical for international competitiveness. They could also take the initiative in establishing the proposed National Research and Innovation Council, which could also assist the government and UGC/HEC in developing S&T-related strategies and policies.

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