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## Why do the best minds of public universities perform so poorly in research?

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After I joined a leading private university in 2015, a question that puzzled me was why so many public university teachers are teaching at private universities. The supply-side answer to this query is the lack of qualified teachers in private universities, which therefore rely on teachers from public universities. But there is also a demand-side story that I find very tempting. The salary and benefits that the public university teachers receive aren't enough to maintain a decent standard of living in an environment of higher rate of inflation.

As a full-time teacher of a private institution, I am not permitted (or encouraged) to teach at other universities. Public university teachers require official consent before they can accept teaching jobs outside their university. These teachers, particularly those in senior positions, have a light teaching load compared to their private university counterparts. And given the comparably large number of teaching staff at public universities, the non-teaching duties of a teacher are fewer.

The combination of light teaching load and less administrative responsibility is designed to incentivise teachers at public universities to conduct fundamental and applied research, to improve the country's educational and scientific competitiveness. The fact that the research output of public universities is unimpressive—for a quick check, see the global ranking of our universities—suggests that teachers are not thinking about research questions in their free time but are rather worried about making ends meet.

When household incomes are squeezed due to rising prices of consumer goods and services (food, health, housing, education, transportation, and entertainment), the resulting financial worries elevate cortisol, a hormone associated with stress. The connection that I want to establish here is that the underlying economic stress of price inflation is holding the brightest minds in our public universities back from conducting research which requires peace of mind. Inflation is pushing our researchers to rent their valuable time to third parties, rather than nurturing their mind for high-impact knowledge creation.

Don't get me wrong. I am not pointing to any limitation of our public universities or marginalising those teachers who are moonlighting in private universities or in consultancies. My argument is about how the inflationary malaise is causing resource misallocation in the sense that prime human capital is being wasted by not *creating* new knowledge, but *renting* existing knowledge.

Our public universities get the best students of our society. Yet due to the lack of time spent by teachers in office or their occupying themselves with outside work, these bright students are not being transformed into next-generation geniuses.

There is no doubt about the capability of our teachers at public universities. But because they have to stress about maintaining a decent standard of living in the face of higher price inflation, they are forced to occupy their research time with non-research activities. Consequently, the brightest students that enter the public universities miss out on the opportunity to become world-class researchers, which requires time, resource and guidance.

I consider this outcome as the “underdevelopment” of our higher education, due to sustained high inflation. Public university professors should not have to worry about making ends meet or how to finance their retired life. Rather, these high-calibre professors should focus on training the future researchers so that our country can have a bright future.

Why am I talking particularly about public universities? Because these universities have both high-calibre teachers and students, which is not always the case in private universities. Moreover, the bulk, if not all, of the public money allocated for research is given to public universities. Finally, as a taxpayer, knowing that my tax money is used to finance public universities, I have the constitutional right to question the poor state of scientific research at our public universities.

It is not unusual to observe poor research track record when a country is at the early stage of economic development. Put differently, is scientific research a luxury good for Bangladesh? If Bangladesh wants to become a high-income country within the next three decades, it must produce a lot of capable researchers across different fields. Otherwise, its graduates equipped with average skills run the risk of losing jobs to robots or clones like them!

If India can develop a competitive space sector, Bangladesh can also create a competitive research sector. The ICDDR,B in Dhaka shows that it is possible to have a world-class research centre in Bangladesh. But it also requires a change of mindset to look beyond the current practice of higher education at public universities and, to varying and debatable degrees, their private counterparts.

The paradox still remains. Why do the best minds (students and teachers alike) in our public universities perform so poorly in research? I discussed price inflation as one important piece of the puzzle. Understanding the other pieces of the puzzle requires candid and constructive discussions.

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