

University admissions

Leading univs withdrawing from cluster system

Session delays, irregularities, and lack of central planning cited as reasons

BACKGROUND	STUDENT CONCERNS
Introduced in 2020-21	Higher application fees without cluster
Initially included 20 universities	Higher travel expenses
Later expanded to 36	UGC'S POSITION
CHALLENGES AND CRITICISMS	No authority to prevent independent tests
Lack of coordination	Suggests divisional tests and reduced fees
Session delays	Lack of coordination causing session delays
AFTERMATH	Allegations of corruption
Many univs withdraw	
They will hold independent tests	

Undergraduate admission tests under the cluster system faces uncertainty for the 2024-25 academic year, as several prominent universities have decided to withdraw and conduct their own admission tests independently.

The cluster system is a centralised undergraduate admission process in Bangladesh designed to streamline applications for multiple universities under shared categories. It was introduced in the 2020-21 academic year to reduce financial strain, save time, and simplify admissions.



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However, lack of coordination among universities has delayed result publication, student admissions, and department allocations, leading to session jams.

The cluster system has also faced growing criticism for alleged corruption.

Leading universities from the clusters including General, Science and Technology, Engineering, and Agricultural are now reconsidering their participation.

"The cluster system caused session delays. While many JnU students from the 2023-24 session have completed their first semester, others are still undergoing migration processes. How can these students keep up with those who have already progressed a semester ahead?" said Jagannath University (JnU) Vice-Chancellor Prof Md Rezaul Karim.

Several other VCs from different clusters expressed similar dissatisfaction.

The cluster admission system initially included 20 general and science-technology universities, later expanding to 24 general, three engineering, and nine agricultural universities.

GENERAL CLUSTER

Jagannath University, which spearheaded the first cluster admission test, has formally withdrawn from the system and announced its 2024-25 undergraduate admission circular independently.

Prof Md Rezaul Karim described the cluster system as an initiative introduced with good intentions but marred by poor planning.

At Khulna University, Vice-Chancellor Prof Rezaul Karim said students and faculty alike have opted out of the system.

"KU now handles five batches simultaneously, instead of the usual four, causing a session jam and disrupting the academic calendar," he said.

While acknowledging the university's recent progress in academic excellence, he warned that the flawed admission process risks undoing these gains. "We are also considering holding our own admission tests," he added.

Meanwhile, Shahjalal University of Science and Technology, Comilla University, Barishal University, and Noakhali Science and Technology University have also decided to hold independent admission tests.

Prof Md Anwarul Azim Akhand, Convener of the GST Integrated Admission Test Committee and VC of Maulana Bhashani Science and Technology University, expressed hope that the cluster exam could still proceed with the remaining universities.

He said no official discussions have taken place yet as the current academic year is still ongoing. A proper decision from the government is awaited.

ENGINEERING CLUSTER

The engineering cluster, consisting of Khulna University of Engineering and Technology, Rajshahi University of Engineering and Technology, and Chittagong University of Engineering and Technology, is also dissolving.

KUET announced its independent admission circular on November 17, scheduling its test for January 11, 2025.

Following this, RUET called an emergency meeting to discuss its participation.

"With KUET's departure, the cluster effectively no longer exists," said RUET Vice-Chancellor Prof SM Razzak.

CUET has yet to finalise its stance, but said the departure of two major universities has left the future uncertain.

AGRICULTURAL CLUSTER

In the agricultural cluster, admission processes for nine universities under the 2023-24 academic year are still ongoing, leaving decisions for 2024-25 pending.

Bangladesh Agricultural University has proposed holding its own tests, as recommended by its Dean Council. However, no official circular has been published yet.

Meanwhile, a group of students preparing for the 2024-25 admission tests submitted a memorandum to the education ministry, urging measures to preserve the cluster system.

They said without it, their application fees and travel expenses would rise substantially.

UGC's POSITION

University Grants Commission (UGC) Chairman Prof SMA Fayeze said the UGC has no legal authority to prevent universities from conducting independent admission tests.

Prof Fayeze suggested that universities opting out should consider holding tests in divisional cities and keeping application fees low.

"We will monitor the decisions of other universities and coordinate the next steps. However, universities should prioritise students' convenience and consult all stakeholders before finalising their decisions," he added.