

Why we must rethink university faculty recruitment



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

The Global Innovation Index (GII) ranks world economies based on their innovation capabilities, using approximately 80 indicators to capture the complex nature of innovation. In the 2023 GII, Bangladesh ranked 105th out of 132 economies. A crucial component of GII, as well as other science, technology, and innovation (STI) indicators, is the performance of tertiary educational institutions.

Unfortunately, Bangladeshi universities are underperforming compared to other countries at similar development levels. Patent statistics from the Department of Patents, Designs, and Trademarks (DPDT)

further highlight this issue. Over the past three decades, Bangladesh has seen approximately 100-400 patent applications annually, with 320 applications in 2023. In stark contrast, India filed over 77,000 patent applications, while emerging Asian countries such as Thailand, Vietnam and the Philippines filed over 8,600, 8,700, and 4,700, respectively, in 2023. South American countries also file thousands of patents each year. Thus, when adjusted for population, our patent per capita ratio is dismal.



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Of professors and publications

Bangladesh's research article production also remains modest compared to other Asian countries. In 2023, as many as 12,879 citable research documents were published in Bangladesh. This number is significantly lower than in several neighbouring countries. For instance, India produced 269,183 documents,

while 37,937 documents were published from Pakistan in the same year. Countries like Thailand and Vietnam also outperform Bangladesh, with Thailand contributing approximately 25,430 citable documents and Vietnam producing around 18,290 documents annually. China leads Asia as well as the whole world with an astounding 1,018,423 citable research papers, showcasing its robust investment in research and development. Meanwhile, Japan has about 124,330 publications, and South Korea and Taiwan contribute approximately 97,487 and 41,654 citable documents, respectively.

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Several factors contribute to this difference. One major issue is the limited focus on research at universities in Bangladesh. Additionally, there is a lack of adequate funding and infrastructure to support extensive research programmes. Other Asian countries have invested heavily in research and development, fostering a robust research culture within their academic institutions.





In the developed and many developing countries, university faculty are primarily researchers, and some do not teach at all. Their value lies in their research contributions, which directly impact the STI ecosystem. In contrast, the current faculty recruitment process in Bangladesh rewards academic diligence during undergraduate and graduate studies, sometimes resulting in faculty members who do minimal research beyond the required publications for promotion.

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The Triple Helix model, which describes the interaction between universities, industries, and government, is essential for fostering a robust STI ecosystem. However, this collaborative framework is still largely absent in Bangladesh. To address this,



we must focus on introducing reforms that can catalyse broader collaboration. Universities in Bangladesh primarily function as teaching institutions, particularly at the undergraduate level, where teachers act as facilitators between textbooks and students. Here, a good teacher is often defined as someone who delivers lectures well and explains concepts clearly, typically from textbooks. This approach, akin to training rather than teaching, may suffice for undergraduate education, but is inadequate for postgraduate studies.

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To transform universities into hubs of knowledge creation, we must overhaul the faculty recruitment process at universities in the country. Universities are meant to generate new knowledge, not merely disseminate existing information. The University Grants Commission's decision to allow private universities to offer PhD degrees is a right step to this end. A robust PhD programme is crucial for fostering a research culture and improving faculty quality. Pursuing PhD transforms individuals from knowledge users to knowledge creators, enabling them to think independently and contribute to knowledge production. Further, understanding a subject deeply enough to challenge existing ideas or te new ones enhances the capacity for innovation and critical thinking.



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P for Private, P for PhD

There are several ways to bring in this transformation. For one, only PhD-qualified faculty members should be recruited to lead research projects. To attract high-quality candidates with advanced degrees, they should be offered extra incentives compared to other jobs that only require a bachelor's or master's degree. Departments at universities should start PhD programmes funded by the government or private sector, allowing universities to produce knowledge and establish strong industry ties. If PhD researchers receive substantial scholarships, it will attract strong candidates to pursue PhDs and eventually transition into teaching roles. Additionally, these researchers can take on roles as teaching and research assistants, further enhancing the academic environment.



Universities should also emphasise research at the master's level. Elite and established universities can pilot this

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model. Finally, undergraduate education needs to be redefined with a focus on research.

Implementing these changes can position Bangladeshi universities as key players in the global innovation landscape, fostering a vibrant ecosystem of knowledge creation and application.

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The fallacy of the 'nerd' stereotype in pop culture



VISUAL: STAR

In mainstream movies and TV shows, top students are often portrayed as "nerds" who are socially awkward or lack friends, reduced to a simplistic and often harmful stereotype. This narrow depiction fails to reflect the real-life diversity and


complexity of high achievers. These students, like anyone else, have unique personalities, interests, and struggles that go beyond their academic achievements. By presenting them only as socially awkward geniuses or as book-smart but generally naive individuals, the entertainment industry not only misrepresents who they are, but also sends a damaging message that undermines the value of hard work and intelligence. These portrayals can affect how society views and treats high achievers, making it harder for these individuals to be seen and appreciated for their true selves.

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The "nerd" stereotype is deeply ingrained in popular culture, often showing top students as socially awkward, physically unimpressive, and overly focused on academics. Characters like Sheldon Cooper from *The Big Bang Theory* and Lisa Simpson from *The Simpsons* suggest that being smart means lacking social skills and physical well-being. This narrow portrayal fails to reflect the reality that many top students balance their academic pursuits with rich social lives, physical activities, and diverse interests. It implies that intellectual achievement comes at the cost of a well-rounded life, which is far from the truth. By reducing these individuals to one-dimensional



characters, the entertainment media perpetuates the harmful idea that intelligence and sociability can't coexist.

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There is also the trope that represents the other extreme, where academically successful characters lack common sense or real-world skills. These characters, often used for comic relief, suggest that academic excellence and practical intelligence are mutually exclusive. Kenneth Parcell from *30 Rock* epitomises this stereotype, depicted as naive and out of touch with real life. This portrayal implies that high achievers in academics are inherently deficient in practical wisdom and everyday competencies, failing to acknowledge that many



individuals are capable of excelling both in their studies and in navigating the complexities of real life.

Such portrayals are problematic for several reasons. Firstly, they reinforce harmful stereotypes that contribute to the social alienation of academically inclined students. When the media consistently depicts top students as either nerdy and awkward or book-smart but clueless, it shapes how their peers perceive them. This can lead to bullying and social isolation, as classmates may view them through the narrow, exaggerated lens provided by these media representations. The message is clear: being a top student makes you "different," and often not in a good way. By perpetuating these limiting views, media contributes to a culture where intelligence and academic dedication are stigmatised rather than celebrated, making it harder for these students to be seen and accepted for who they truly are. A more humanising and accurate portrayal would help break down these stereotypes, fostering a more inclusive environment where academic achievement is appreciated and respected.



Secondly, these stereotypes perpetuate a false dichotomy between intelligence and social adeptness. In reality, many


high-achieving students are well-rounded individuals. They possess emotional intelligence, leadership skills, and a diverse array of interests. By ignoring these aspects, media representations do a disservice to the complex nature of human capabilities.

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The rising nerd-chic

When the pursuit of knowledge is consistently linked with negative social outcomes or perceived impracticality, students might shy away from their academic potential to avoid being labelled "different." This can contribute to a culture that undervalues education and intellectual achievement, with long-term societal consequences.

It is crucial for content creators to  up more nuanced characters. Depicting top students as well-rounded individuals who face and overcome challenges can provide

positive role models for young viewers, showing that academic success and social competence can coexist harmoniously. By highlighting their diverse motivations and backgrounds, content creators can break away from these harmful moulds, reflecting the true diversity of high achievers. Not every top student fits into a single stereotype, and showcasing a variety of experiences and personalities can inspire a broader range of young people. By portraying top students as multifaceted individuals, the entertainment media can foster a more inclusive and realistic understanding of what it means to excel, encouraging young people to embrace their potential without fear of stigma or social isolation.

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Finance is key to Bangladesh's energy transition

Visual: Star

Bangladesh is facing a double whammy. On one hand, climate-change induced events continue to ravage the country, compelling it to spend 6-7 percent of its annual budget on adaptation each year. On the other hand, transitioning to capital-intensive clean energy is also a necessity for the country given its reliance on fossil fuels, which increases costs and drives up inflation. These competing



priorities mean that Bangladesh will need to consistently invest in critical climate-resilient infrastructure and clean energy technologies in the next several decades.


To achieve these goals, it is important that Bangladesh streamline its funding schemes and identify viable sources of financing.

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Drivers of a clean energy transition

Cyclone Remal, which hit Bangladesh in May 2024, affected as many as 3.8 million people, damaging 150,000 houses. This was not a one-off event. Although Bangladesh is prone to ones of similar magnitude or more, such extreme events are likely to become frequent in future. As a result, the country will need more funding to adapt to climate change.

There are several reasons why Bangladesh should invest in clean energy. Dependence on imported fossil fuel has proven costly for Bangladesh. Apart from the high price volatility of fossil fuels in the international market during 2022-23, the recent devaluation of the Bangladeshi taka by Tk 7 per US dollar in May 2024 has made fossil fuel imports more costly. As a result, the Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC) incurred an additional cost of Tk 5 billion (\$42.3 million) to import fuel oil in May 2024. BPC's annual cost may increase by Tk 60 billion (\$511 million), which is enough to install a combined rooftop solar capacity of more than half a gigawatt (GW).

Since importing fossil fuels such as liquefied natural gas and coal is also expensive now, the government will feel the pressure of increasing tariffs for electricity and gas.

However, raising tariffs cannot eliminate the subsidy burden. The subsidy for the power sector soared to Tk 395.35 billion (\$3.34 billion) in fiscal year (FY) 2022-23 from Tk 296.58 billion (\$2.51 billion) in FY2021-22.  Despite the 15 percent tariff hike on electricity between January and March 2023.

Bangladesh must invest more in renewable energy and energy efficiency to reduce fossil fuel imports to reverse the increasing trajectory of the subsidy burden.

Energy transition will necessitate billions in financing

According to the Integrated Energy and Power Master Plan (IEPMP 2023), Bangladesh plans to install a total of 37.8GW new renewable energy (primarily solar and wind) capacity until 2050 under the advanced technology scenario (ATS) (taking the in-between growth scenario which considered the average of the growth rates projected in the country's perspective plan and the International Monetary Fund's estimates). The IEPMP estimates that the combined capacity of 37.8GW renewable energy without energy storage systems will cost Bangladesh \$37.4 billion.
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However, renewable energy capacity may reach 26.2GW in 2050 under the in-between growth case, excluding ATS. The changed IEPMP scenario indicates that the country may have 17 percent renewable energy by 2050, implying that the installed renewable energy capacity will be less than 20GW.

According to IEEFA's estimate, even the installation of 20GW renewable energy capacity with battery storage for 30 percent of the capacity for four-hour back-up may require around \$1 billion investment a year through 2050.

Financing the energy transition

Bangladesh should set a mission that is fit-for-purpose to lead an effective energy transition, with finance at its core. This is not only due to insufficient financing schemes, but also the challenges posed by the current banking and finance framework in the country.

For instance, Bangladesh Bank's refinancing scheme of Tk 4 billion (\$33.84 million) for environment-friendly projects has recently been increased to Tk 10 billion (\$84.6 million) but the cap for a loan to a solar park is only Tk 0.3 billion (\$2.54 million). The loan amount is inadequate in relation to the required finance volume even for a 10 megawatt (MW) solar project.

To accelerate its energy transition, Bangladesh should explore available financing avenues, such as multilateral development banks (MDBs), green



bonds, private equity funds, investment promotion and financing facilities.

The Infrastructure Development Company Limited, a non-banking financial institution (NBFI), finances utility-scale clean energy projects in Bangladesh with funding from multilateral and bilateral agencies. Likewise, another NBFI, the Bangladesh Infrastructure Finance Fund Limited, can extend debt finance to clean energy projects. However, other local financial institutions should also develop the capacity to access the low-cost finance offered by MDBs. As the country mostly imports clean energy technologies, funding in US dollars is of utmost importance to ensure a smooth opening of letters of credit (LCs) for projects.

Bangladesh Bank published a policy for the issuance of green bonds by banks and financial institutions in 2022. Green bonds can help expedite the clean energy transition in Bangladesh by raising funds for capital-intensive clean energy projects. Institutional investors have a major role to play as a large-scale renewable energy project may require funding worth several hundred million US dollars. It is imperative to incentivise

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individual investors with green bonds when the government's saving instruments provide lucrative returns.


 Switching to renewables is easier than we think

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Switching to renewables is easier than we think

A lack of equity among sponsors often delays renewable energy projects. Private equity firms with a focus on environmental, social and governance (ESG) may invest in renewable energy projects. These firms are still at a nascent stage in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh Bank's Investment Promotion and Financing Facility, supported by the World Bank, helped develop infrastructure projects in the country. While the funding phase has ended, a new phase, if launched, may speed up the energy transition. The scheme will be fit for purpose as the  is disbursed in dollars with a tenor of 20 years.

Early preparation to identify and access finance while developing the capacity of local financial institutions is key to driving an effective and sustainable energy transition. The situation demands a bold response—defining a path that will not compromise the needs of the country, both on the climate adaptation and energy transition fronts.

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