

# University of Dhaka and collective failures



*The Curzon Hall. | Wikimedia Commons*

THIS happened a decade ago. The chair of the department where I studied at the University of Dhaka in the early 1990s invited me, along with others, to an exchange of views on the Higher Education Quality Enhancement Project, officially HEQEP but jokingly ‘hiccup’ even to many university teachers. The University Grants Commission project, which the World Bank funded, was meant to upgrade university teaching, research and institutional facilities.

We were about a dozen of us, both as graduates and people dealing with fresh graduates, in the department office, with two consultants sitting on the other side of the table. We exchanged views with the local consultant to the project, a teacher of another university, whilst the other that the World Bank sent mostly observed and took down notes. The local consultant asked me whether the university had provided me with what I intended to learn there when I was

a student. I told him, as I believe now and believed then, that a university should ideally provide students with the space and the environment for learning. This was a case of a horse being led to water but could not be made to drink.

The consultant almost politely retorted, saying that the students could not properly write curriculum vitae, or short CVs, which I thought he referred to. He weighed the option of introducing a course on CV writing. I told him that if he wanted the students to properly write CVs, the department could hold a seminar or a workshop — and many of them. But, there was no point in wasting a course on writing CVs. He appeared a bit unsettled and a bit annoyed, too. After the project, which began in 2009, had ended in 2018, a few criticised the project for being too focused on infrastructural development, taking lightly issues of administration and academic improvement. Changes, it appeared, were meant to be cosmetic rather than getting at the root of the system that would intrinsically add to the standard of education, a decline in which has these days often been a thing of fashion to talk about.

The minister of state for education has also recently made a comment, comparing the state-funded University of Dhaka to 'a coaching centre.' The remark harks back to the casual criticism of the university, without trying to resolve the issues that have lowered the status of the university, if we go by what the minister has said, to that of a coaching centre. The minister has, however, taken back his remarks that he made in an Eid-special podcast appearance, in a posting on his verified Facebook wall. In walking back his remarks, he has argued that the comments were made during an informal discussion and they were not intended as a research-based, institutional or policy statement. Some say that the unrestrained chit-chat that we used to have with friends in drawing rooms in the analogue era becomes a podcast when it goes on record in a room with an anchor in the digital era. At least, it so seems. We are reminded that public figures should have no private moments in public.

The taking back of the comments is only face-saving. The essence remains. What has gone wrong with the University of Dhaka? When the minister compares the university with a coaching centre, he obviously tries to highlight that the standard, even if in research and education, of the university has declined to a level as low as that of coaching centres, where no research is carried out. The comparison comes with two corollaries to the axiomatic expression that universities are weightier than coaching centres. Firstly, the decline in the standard of the university, as the minister tried to make a case of, falls back in the form of failures on the government, or, rather, successive governments. Why has the government allowed the premier seat of higher learning to stoop so low? Secondly, the government fails to stop coaching

centres, which the minister thinks are bad, if they were never meant to exist at all.

A couple of public intellectuals much earlier compared the university with a madrassah, or a higher madrassah, mainly because of the 'mixture of students' having madrassah and general education backgrounds that may cause 'complexity.' This is another episode resulting from the events of 2008–2010. The university had for years restricted madrassah students, who passed the alim examinations from aliya madrassahs, from enrolling on seven departments. The departments were Bangla, English, economics, law, mass communication and journalism, and international relations. The university argued that the madrassah curriculum did not require the students to take up the 200-mark papers in Bangla and English, which was discriminating against students following the general education curriculum who took up 200-mark papers.

The issue entered a legal wrangle and the court declared the admission rules of the university for its select departments illegal. The court also asked the madrassah education board to align its syllabus with general academic requisites. The issue was not resolved there and the university resistance continued. The madrassah authorities in 2013 introduced 200 marks each for Bangla and English. The 2013 update of the madrassah curriculum allowed madrassah students to seek admission to the seven departments of the university in the 2017–18 academic session.

After the university had opened all its doors to madrassah students, media reports came up, noting that the percentage of madrassah students outpaced the percentage of students having general education. One argument for the

increase in the number of madrassah students was that madrassah teachers were generous about evaluation without being bothered about quality. This earned madrassah students more marks in dakhil, equivalent to SSC, and alim, equivalent to HSC, examinations, which helped them more in admission to the university.

A teacher of the university, a friend of mine, once told me that he had found that madrassah students had, on average, the advantage of 3–3.5 points more coming from the secondary and higher secondary public examinations than students from general education institutions. Whilst the madrassah students accounted for 60 per cent of the students, as the United News of Bangladesh reported in 2018, the percentage in the law department was as high as 78 per cent.

The proposition used to be observed mostly in the departments under the faculty of humanities, law and social sciences where students took the admission test under Unit B. The university then decided to stop taking the admission test for the 2021–2022 academic session under Unit D, which was a gateway for students of one stream in secondary and higher secondary education to switch tracks. But it had to discard the plan for the session, resolving to do away with the Unit D admission beginning with the 2022–2023 session.

With the Unit D admission having been discontinued, the admission-seekers who would earlier switch tracks through the abolished unit needed to directly face admission tests to science departments under Unit A, to humanities, law and social science departments under Unit B and to business studies

departments under Unit C. Unit F admission to fine arts departments has continued as usual.

The structural change in the admission process has allowed the enrolment of students having madrassah education, as a few teachers say, to increase in social science and business studies departments. There is no harm in that. But the generous evaluation of students in the madrassahs, as alleged, needs to be effectively handled to counterbalance the advantage madrassah students are reported to have come to gain. This is an issue of teacher training and proper oversight that appears to be lacking in madrassahs. Besides, there are a couple of issues alleged, all known to the university administration, that are like dirty linens that should not be washed in public. All relevant authorities should put their best foot forward to make the university admission equal for all.

Almost everybody also comes up criticising the politicisation or partisanisation of the university administration that has brought down the standard of education. The individuals and entities that come up with such criticism also include ranking functionaries of the government, which makes the appointment of the vice-chancellor. The blame game is at play within the teaching staff, the university administration and the government, with all but a handful of them occasionally rising up in protests, especially when they are approached for comments by journalists.

The university legislation, the Dhaka Order University 1973, lays out that the chancellor, who is the president of the republic, appoints the vice-chancellor for four years from a panel of three that the senate, the highest decision-making body of the institution, which had been known as the university court

until the order, elects in a special session; and the proposition is open to reappointment. In the case of a vacancy because of leave or illness, the chancellor makes an interim arrangement. The legislation is hardly honoured although this also leaves the scope for partisanisation if the process cannot be kept off partisan interests. Besides, the president, the chancellor in this case, acts 'in accordance with the advice' of the prime minister, who heads the executive.

Whilst the aberration, which has almost been typical for ages, often stops merit, academic excellence and administrative competence from being at play, resulting in the degradation of the institutions of higher education, this also brings in corruption and favouritism, leading to irregularities in teacher appointment, promotion and staff appointment. The reliance on political loyalty incentivises academics to take part in political manoeuvring rather than fostering academic excellence and stops the institution from becoming the centre of independent learning.

The interim administration devised a way to sidestep the university legislation in this regard. The education ministry on May 19, 2025 set up a five-member search committee to propose a panel of three candidates for the positions of the vice-chancellor, pro-vice-chancellor and the treasurer in all public universities as a means to move away from politically influenced selection. But the process, whilst being illegal, is highly vulnerable to partisanisation. It showed signs of partisan interests even during the interim administration, which may not have fully thought out the process. It may have taken the cue from the earlier interim administration, the military-backed government, which in 2007 instructed the University Grants Commission to lay out an umbrella

law for the selection of vice-chancellors, deans and the appointment of teachers at the entry level in all public universities.

The ministry that time set up a seven-member search committee headed by the education secretary to recruit vice-chancellors, pro-vice-chancellors and treasurers for all public universities in a transparent manner. The four autonomous universities of Dhaka, Rajshahi, Chittagong and Jahangirnagar were kept out of the committee purview. But before the plan, the University Grants Commission sought names of senior professors from six public universities — the four, the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology and the Bangladesh Agricultural University — that could be used as a pool for top positions in public universities. The universities did not comply.

The Bangladesh Nationalist Party government has only followed in the footsteps of what the interim administration left behind. This is no sign of good academic governance. And, that does not make the process legal as the search committee is set up by executive decisions. The education ministry on April 1 reconstituted the search committee. The ministry on April 13, however, appointed the vice-chancellor to the Jashore University of Science and Technology. The teacher made vice-chancellor is reported to have been a leader of the University of Dhaka teachers' white panel, leaning towards the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and the Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami.

The government in March appointed vice-chancellors to eight public universities, not based on the vice-chancellors' panel nominated by university senates. Such a proposition hardly leaves any scope for the priority of competence over partisan loyalty. When the education minister announced the

appointment of vice-chancellors to seven public universities on March 16, what he said meant that political engagement is no disqualification for anyone. It is true that political engagement is no disqualification, but the consideration of that political engagement as a factor in the appointment of vice-chancellors is degrading. This has taken place for ages, not only in the University of Dhaka but in all other universities even when the institutions are autonomous.

With the administrative affairs of public universities having been heavily partisanised over the years because of systemic flaws, it may now be difficult to find scholars who are entirely free of political leanings for top university positions. It is, therefore, incumbent on all concerned to work towards departisanising the process for any meaningful improvement in academia.

The placement of universities, or the University of Dhaka, in world rankings has for more than a decade started creating fears and favours, thus giving rise to controversies. The University of Dhaka now holds the 801–1000th band in the Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2026. After holding the 601–800th band in 2016, the university slid below the top 1000 in 2018. It had spent several years in the 1001–1200th bracket before advancing 200 places to the 801–1000th band. The latest placement of the university suggests that it has improved its standard. If it has been so, why has the minister of state come up with off-the-cuff comments? The global ranking has been around for about two decades, quietly trying to reshape the behaviour of universities. Straight-jacket minds are drawn into the ranking, giving rise to criticism, without understanding whether the THE ranking is a template that Bangladesh should follow or reject.

Whilst some universities have begun asking whether its influence has gone too far, some others have decided to step away. Universities in Bangladesh, meanwhile, struggle to maintain foundational learning outcomes, which makes the THE template different for universities in Europe and universities in Bangladesh. Sorbonne University in France has stepped away from the ranking, citing a commitment to the CoARA Agreement. The American University of Beirut in Lebanon stepped away, citing insufficient safeguards against ranking manipulation. The University of Jordan and Al-Bayt University in Jordan withdrew from the ranking. The Middle East University in Jordan withdrew, citing the introduction of financial subscription systems, which points to a commercial orientation. The University of Zurich in Switzerland and Utrecht University in the Netherlands withdrew over concern that rankings promote unhealthy competition and false incentives. Renmin University of China, Nanjing University and Lanzhou University withdrew from all international university rankings in May 2022, citing safeguards for ‘educational autonomy’ and ‘education with Chinese characteristics.’

Another grave problem with the ranking system is the methodology that places heavy emphasis on citations per teacher and research impact. These are areas where Bangladeshi universities are disadvantaged. It entirely promotes the essence of the American education system — ‘publish or perish.’ Teachers who create knowledge and instil knowledge in students would need to prove their eligibility by counting pages that they write for others to cite. Historian Tapan Raychaudhuri has a defence for teachers not writing when they do not actually have anything novel to say. In his autobiographical book titled *Bangalnama*, published in May 2007, he says that in old Oxford, people

believed that someone would write something only when there was something to tell.

Writing should not be a safeguard for the job. Research is valued for its merit, not for its number. A focus on the number or volume of research would certainly result in thoughtlessness. He talks of Welsh historian Keith Thomas, whose monumental book, his first, was published in 1971. But he spent 18 years writing the book. And no second Keith Thomas has emerged in the days of the 'publish or perish' philosophy. He tells a story. In the days of Margaret Thatcher, the UK government decided to account for every penny of taxpayers' money. But how would it fit in with academia? The answer was simple — by counting pages that teachers write in a year. And he talks of a hot-tempered Scottish scholar. An American researcher asked him, 'What is your field?' The angry professor blurted out, 'I am no cow, man! I don't have no field.' He laments that researchers choose their own fields and graze there. And they regurgitate the half-digested grass and leaves continuously in printed letters. The goddess of learning desperately looks for exits because of the stench.

The authorities concerned should also devise ways and means to assess the relevance of university rankings and accord due importance to the quality of teaching that teachers provide. It is time to decide whether securing a place in global rankings is more important than actually improving teaching and learning in universities.

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