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Universities must spend more on research

RESEARCH makes universities. And basic research, generally referred to as a public good and designed to advance basic scientific ideas rather than to develop specific products, has always been important the world over in the development of ideas, products and applications. This is what the universities, mostly public, of Bangladesh fail to understand and, thus, allocation for research in university budgets seems, worryingly, to have a very low priority. This has become evident in the budgets of the University of Dhaka, the country's premier seat of higher learning, and of Jahangirnagar University. Both the universities passed their respective budget on June 17 for the 2018 financial year, with the University of Dhaka allocating 2.1 per cent, or Tk 140 million out of the total outlay of about Tk 6.64 billion, and Jahangirnagar University allocating 0.75 per cent, or Tk 17.5 million out of the total outlay of about Tk 2.32 billion, for research. Although Dhaka University has increased its allocation for research for the 2018 financial year, compared with that for the 2017 financial year, when it was 1.83 per cent, or Tk 121.6 million out of the total outlay of about Tk 6.64 billion, the increase is far short of what is expected and required.

The bulk of the budget, almost four-fifths, at least in Dhaka University, as New Age reported, and presumably also in all other public universities is spent on paying salaries and allowances of the teaching and other staff. Spending on the salaries and allowances in public universities has increased as the universities continue to recruit people, even teaching more than the requirement in many cases. The trend has increased with more politicisation of the university teaching staff and the administration, especially after the 1990s. While the universities would need to recruit people to meet their demand, and there is no harm in it, they should also increase allocation for research, which has hovered around a similar percentage, at least in Dhaka University, for some years. It is time that the universities understood that they need to spend more money on research, even without having any idea of what may come from it. They appear to be more interested in applications and products, but they must remember that applications do not arise unless the basic research is done. Because of inadequate, or non-existent, research, none of the 39 public universities in Bangladesh could earn any place in the Reuters' annual ranking of the Asia Pacific region's Most Innovative Universities, published recently, which is not only demeaning for the institutions of higher learning but also for the nation as a whole.

Seats of higher learning in Bangladesh should, therefore, spend more on research and the University of Dhaka should give utmost priority to research to light up the way for other institutions to follow. The government and managers of universities are, thus, left with no option but to step up to the plate on research front to make universities work like universities in creating knowledge and advancing science and technology.