Research Funding in Higher Education

Where private universities stand in Bangladesh

27 JULY 2026, 00:00 AM UNIVERSITIES OF TOMORROW SHARE

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Bangladesh has no shortage of university graduates. What it continues to lack is the research needed to solve its own problems. From climate resilience and public health to artificial intelligence and urban planning, the country's future increasingly depends on knowledge that is created at home rather than imported. Yet the question of who pays for that knowledge remains one of the least discussed challenges in higher education.

For decades, research has largely remained the domain of public universities, backed by government allocations and public research institutes. Private universities, despite accounting for a significant share of the country's tertiary enrolment, have traditionally focused on teaching rather than research. As Bangladesh's higher education sector becomes increasingly competitive and internationally connected, however, that distinction is becoming harder to sustain.

Today, research output has become a key measure of a university's quality. Global rankings, accreditation standards and international partnerships all place considerable emphasis on publications and research innovations. For private universities, the challenge is no longer whether they should invest in research, but whether they have the financial capacity to do so.

A different funding reality

The financial model of private universities differs fundamentally from that of their public counterparts. Public universities receive government funding for academic activities, infrastructure and, in many cases, research projects. Private institutions, on the other hand, rely overwhelmingly on tuition fees to sustain their operations.

Once expenses such as faculty salaries, scholarships, campus maintenance and administrative costs are met, relatively little remains to finance research. Building laboratories, purchasing specialised equipment, maintaining research software, funding fieldwork or supporting publication costs all require long-term investment. As a result, while several leading private universities have established research offices, innovation centres and internal grant schemes, research funding often remains limited in both scale and scope.

Research is expensive

Quality research rarely comes cheaply. Scientific disciplines require sophisticated laboratories, specialised instruments and continuous supplies of consumables. Engineering projects demand modern testing facilities, while medical research often involves ethical approvals, clinical data and specialised equipment.

The costs extend beyond the sciences. Social science researchers require funding for surveys, interviews and travel. Economists need access to datasets. Scholars in the humanities increasingly rely on digital archives and specialised software, while publishing in internationally recognised journals frequently involves article processing charges.

Without dedicated funding, many academics conduct research alongside demanding teaching responsibilities, often financing smaller projects themselves or seeking opportunities through international collaborators.

Looking beyond institutional budgets

Faced with financial constraints, many researchers have turned to external funding. International development agencies, foreign universities and multilateral organisations regularly support projects related to climate adaptation, disaster risk reduction, renewable energy, agriculture, healthcare and digital governance.

Securing these grants, however, is far from straightforward. Successful applications demand experienced grant-writing teams, established international partnerships and strong research portfolios. Many private universities are still developing the institutional structures needed to compete consistently for such funding. Younger academics, despite possessing innovative ideas, often lack the administrative support required to transform proposals into successful research projects.

The consequence is a research landscape where funding opportunities remain concentrated among a relatively small number of institutions.

An opportunity for industry

One of the greatest untapped opportunities lies in collaboration between universities and industry. Across developed economies, companies routinely invest in university research to improve manufacturing processes, develop new technologies and address practical business challenges. Such partnerships create a mutually beneficial ecosystem in which businesses gain access to academic expertise while universities receive financial support and opportunities for applied research.

Bangladesh has yet to fully embrace this model. Although industries increasingly recognise the importance of innovation, investment in university-led research remains relatively limited. Businesses often continue to import technology rather than support local research and development, while universities sometimes struggle to align their research priorities with industrial needs.

Greater collaboration could help bridge the funding gap while ensuring that research addresses challenges directly relevant to Bangladesh's economy.

Building a research culture

Funding, however, represents only part of the equation. Research flourishes where institutions actively nurture a culture of inquiry.

Universities that consistently produce impactful research typically provide faculty members with dedicated research time, administrative support, mentorship programmes and incentives for publishing in reputable journals. Access to digital libraries, international databases and modern laboratory facilities further strengthens research capacity. Several private universities such as Brac, NSU, UIU etc have begun moving in this direction through undergraduate research initiatives, faculty seed grants and interdisciplinary research centres. These efforts demonstrate growing recognition that research is integral to higher education in Bangladesh. Sustaining that momentum, however, requires long-term financial commitment from the authorities of the private universities.