

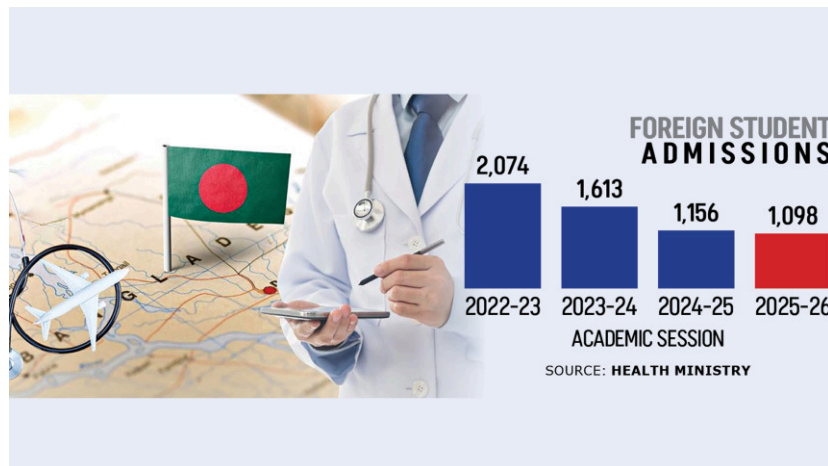
Private Medical Colleges: Foreign student enrolment drops over past 3 years

20 JUNE 2026, 00:00 AM BANGLADESH

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Enrolment of foreign students in Bangladesh's private medical colleges has declined sharply over the past three years, raising concerns about the sector's competitiveness and the country's position as a destination for medical education.

Admissions of foreign students dropped to 1,098 in the 2025-26 academic session from 2,074 in 2022-23 -- a decline of nearly 50 percent, according to health ministry data.



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The fall has been driven primarily by a decrease in the number of Indian students, who traditionally make up more than two-thirds of foreign students in Bangladesh's private medical colleges, said officials and college owners, citing strains in Bangladesh-India ties following the 2024 political changeover.

Other contributing factors are a lack of international recognition of the country's medical education accreditation system, a sharp reduction in fees at Indian private medical colleges, and an increase in admission capacity of medical colleges in India, they said.

Each of the 72 private medical colleges in Bangladesh is allowed to enrol foreign students up to 45 percent of its total seats.

In the 2025-26 session, 6,278 seats were available in these colleges, meaning they could admit more than 2,800 foreign students. However, they managed to enrol only 1,098 foreign students.

Public medical colleges have 125 seats reserved for students from SAARC countries and 99 seats for students from other countries. In the current session, 106 students enrolled from SAARC countries, while around 20 students, mostly from Palestine, were admitted under the “other regions” category.

REASONS BEHIND THE DECLINE

Prof Moazzem Hossain, general secretary of Bangladesh Medical College Association, identified two major reasons behind the decline: propaganda amid strained Bangladesh-India relations, and a sharp increase in medical education opportunities in India.

A widespread negative campaign in India discouraged students from pursuing medical education in Bangladesh, contributing significantly to the decline. A similar campaign in Nepal also led to a fall in the number of Nepali students here, he noted.

Health ministry data show that Indian students accounted for between 68 percent and 72 percent of all foreign students enrolled in Bangladesh’s medical colleges from the 2021-22 academic session to 2023-24. Their share fell to 44 percent in the 2024-25 session.

In the 2021-22 session, 1,432 of the 1,992 foreign students were Indian. In the last academic session, 507 of the 1,156 foreign students were from India, show the data.

The association ran promotional campaigns in Nepal, drawing around 200 students from there in this session, but the number of Indian students remained low compared to previous years, he added.

A Times of India report published in October 2025 said India saw a rise in the number of medical colleges from 387 in 2014 to 819 in 2025. Seats for undergraduate courses rose to 129,000 from 51,000 and those for postgraduate courses to 78,000 from 31,000 during the period, the report said.

In July 2022, India’s National Medical Commission directed that fees for 50 percent of seats in private medical colleges and “deemed universities” (institutions granted university status by the government) be aligned with those of public medical colleges, substantially lowering costs for many students, according to Indian media reports.

The drop in foreign student numbers is also linked to the pending global recognition of Bangladesh Medical Education Accreditation Council (BMEAC), which accredits both public and private medical colleges, said Prof Nazmul Hossain, director general of the Directorate General of Medical Education (DGME).

Many prospective foreign students may hesitate to pursue medical studies in Bangladesh as the World Federation for Medical Education (WFME) has yet to recognise BMEAC, he told this correspondent recently.

Besides, the overall situation in the country following the 2024 political changeover may have discouraged some foreign students from choosing Bangladesh as a study destination.

REVIVAL PLAN

Prof Nazmul said that bilateral relations with India have improved since this government took office, raising hopes for an increase in the enrolment of Indian students.

He said the government has already taken several steps to attract more foreign students. The foreign and home ministries have already been asked to simplify visa procedures for foreign students.

Following instructions from the health minister, the authorities are also planning to lower the minimum academic requirements for foreign students seeking admission to medical colleges here, he added.

Prof Humayun Kabir Talukder, registrar of BMEAC, said the council has been implementing WFME's recommendations and has so far received positive feedback.

“We hope to receive WFME recognition soon. Once we obtain it, it will help attract more foreign students.”

He said the council has accredited four public medical colleges and one private college so far. Another 13, mostly private colleges, are in the process of obtaining BMEAC accreditation.

Pointing to the similarities in medical curricula in Bangladesh and India, Prof Moazzem said, “India can still remain a major source of foreign students for us.”

He further said the association plans to launch promotional campaigns in India next month and explore new markets such as Indonesia and South Africa.

Moazzem pointed out that in the past, a large number of foreign students from Bangladeshi expatriate families in the Middle East used to enrol in Bangladeshi medical colleges but their numbers have declined in recent times.

“We have requested the government to arrange admission tests in those countries so that more students can come from there,” he added.