

The public vs private university debate and why it's outmoded

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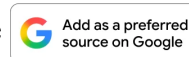
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Shoumik Zubyer

It took less than 72 hours for the state minister for Primary and Mass Education, Bobby Hajjaj, to walk back on his now-infamous podcast remarks regarding Dhaka University's (DU) status as a glorified "coaching centre". His stance regarding DU's seemingly dwindling academic inclinations and an unfounded comparison to private institutions had caused a riot on social media.

"What North South University (NSU) and BRAC University contribute to research output, DU is yet to yield a fraction of," he said.

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Following the state minister's remarks, several students took to DU's TSC, protesting the minister's comments, and declaring him a persona non grata on the DU campus.

However, what that storm of the week led to was a very real question: Was the criticism by the state minister justified, or were his comments just out of touch?

What the rankings say

In the 2026 QS World University Rankings, DU sat at 584; the year before, at 554. This year, it sits at 600th. Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET) follows in the 711–720 bracket; NSU sits further back in the 900–950 bracket. By this measure, DU is well ahead, still holding down as the premier institution of the country.

In the frame of scholarly research, the Times Higher Education World Rankings weights research output, citations, and research income at approximately 60 percent of the total score. For 2026, Daffodil International University, NSU, Jahangirnagar University, Gazipur Agricultural University, and DU ranked jointly in the 801–1000 bracket. By research-intensive accounting, the country's flagship public institution and its largest private one are functionally tied.

DU has the largest cumulative output at over 21,900 publications and 325,000 citations across its history, according to the EduRank index, leading the country in biology, chemistry, medicine, environmental science, economics, and liberal arts. Stanford University's list of the “World's Top 2% Scientists” boasts exactly 286 researchers from Bangladesh across 71 institutions, of which the majority are from DU.

However, these achievements, in terms of research output, have never been matched by proportionate funding.

DU's previous budget allocated BDT 21.57 crore to research – 2.08 percent of the annual expenditure – spread across more than 2,000 teachers. *The Daily Star* reports that DU, on June 29, approved a BDT 1,033.21 crore budget for the 2026-27 fiscal year, with no research allocation from the University Grants Commission of Bangladesh (UGC) for the first time, albeit against an asking of a mere BDT 21.03 crore.

Internationally competitive research cannot be done on that ration – now reduced to zero. The institution has been set up by the state to fail at exactly the thing it is being mocked for failing at.



The fight that does not need to happen

In the hallmark prestige systems of education that bolster global progress, namely South Korea's SKY university trio, Ivy League in the US, Russell Group in the UK, and the Group of 8 in Australia, the public-private distinction is not a fault line. These should be seen as a template to hold a candle to.

For example, Singapore's Agency for Science, Technology and Research (A*STAR) runs joint laboratories with the National University of Singapore and with private partners, from Siemens to homegrown biotech start-ups. Singapore's first publicly funded drug candidate, ETC-159, a cancer drug now in clinical trials, came out of an internationally charged A*STAR–Duke University–NUS collaboration.

Germany's Fraunhofer-Gesellschaft boasts 74 institutes, around 32,000 employees, EUR 3.6 billion in annual budget infrastructure, and operates on hybrid collaboration. Around 30 percent of the budget is base public funding; the rest is earned through contract and grant work conducted hand-in-glove with German universities. A Fraunhofer institute director is, by design, also a chaired faculty member at a partner university.

Basically, the public-private competition that defines Bangladeshi academia is largely absent among most leading institutions abroad, where sharing staff, students, and intellectual property is the norm rather than the exception.

Moreover, it is nonsensical for anyone to resent NSU for being better resourced, and to resent DU for its legendary reputation.

“The government's responsibility is to assist in enhancing the quality of universities where applicable, not to engage in divisive conjecture,” said Dr Anwar Zahid, an adjunct faculty member at the Department of Geology, DU, and the former director of Ground Water Hydrology at the Bangladesh Water Development Board. Dr Zahid found the narrative pushed by the state minister's comments and the students' vehement reactions on social media to be unproductive.

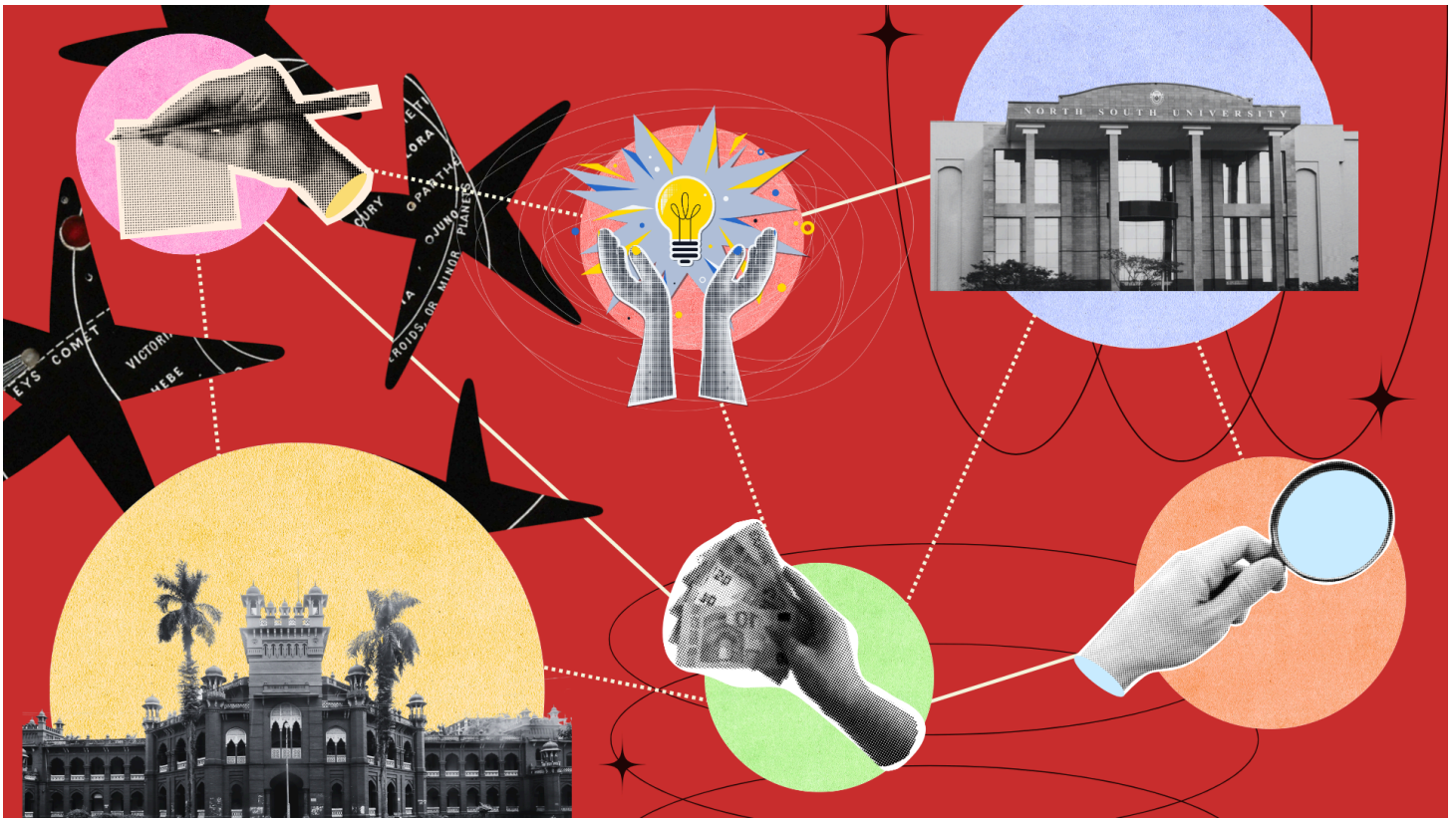


Illustration: Abir Hossain

“There is no doubt that a significant number of dedicated, talented faculty members and their prodigal students at either university are conducting research that is being published in renowned journals. However, a large portion of this work is only possible through collaborative efforts with domestic and international academic and industry ties. One might as well question how many departments or institutes at either premier university actually possess the laboratories or other facilities and support necessary for world-class research. Furthermore, rather than placing the blame for any such inadequacies on the researchers, it is the state's responsibility to build robust infrastructure and create incentives,” said Dr Zahid.

Bangladesh has a research agenda visible from space, and almost none of it is being addressed at the scale the country's universities are theoretically capable of.

Climate adaptation in a low-lying delta requires hydrology, soil science, agronomy, public health, and economics in a single room. These competencies remain scattered across DU's earth and environmental sciences department, BUET's water resources department, NSU's environmental science and management department, and BRAC University's climate change centre.



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National-level emergencies, such as dengue surveillance, drug-resistant superbacteria, dwindling air quality, and the death of municipal rivers, are all still persistent.

The garments sector, which accounts for over 80 percent of national exports, has almost no domestic research and development assistance for synthetic fibres, sustainable dyes, or analytics. These services are imported, expedited to countries that reap the advent of cheap labour.



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The overwhelming pressures of a public university aspirant

A joint architecture would offer something more concrete, like a single DNA sequencing platform that may serve a dozen research groups. DU students working on genetically modifying bacteria to remediate harmful salts at industrial sites may opt for formal lateral collaboration with the facilities available only to NSU. Private institutions may also avail international faculty collaborations DU has a stronger hand in. Both can jointly ask for grants available to government-subsidised projects that favour public universities.

Industry-aligned PhD fellowships of the kind A*STAR routinely funds and exchanges that let a BUET faculty member spend a semester in an NSU partner lab are also possibilities. Fundraising applications to the World Bank, Asian Development Bank (ADB), and Bangladesh Bank may tie it altogether, as joint-funding applications by universities show promise to grant avenues.

“If a logical view of evolution is observed, collaboration has always benefitted the insects on the forest floor more than competition has benefitted the birds that prey upon them,” said Dr Akhter Hossain Khan, the Vice-Chancellor of State University of Bangladesh. “The birds are the ones to pass in fighting over the not-so-scarce resources. Find common ground in sharing resources; don’t promote infighting. I say that having taught at the ‘coaching centre’.”

"The only thing more thoroughly researched at DU than the question of why DU does no research is the question of whose turn it is to say 'Bangladesh means Dhaka University'," said Nusrat Jahan, a fourth-year statistics student at DU.

Jahan added that she had applied for an undergraduate research assistantship the previous semester and been told, in writing, that her department's research budget for the year would be spent on a single international journal subscription.

A counterpart at NSU’s Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering, Sayad Zaman Ador, was less amused by his own institution's victory lap. “We are much better at flash mobs than any other institution, but DU takes the cake for a more ‘informal gathering’ when criticism strikes. Though it goes without saying, most of NSU's high-impact output comes from maybe forty faculty members, and we strive for joint research with no avenues yet to be seen.”

Tahmid Karim, a sophomore at the Department of Chemical Engineering at BUET, said, "We have spent a week arguing whether or not DU is a coaching centre. Nobody has asked whether the system, as a whole, is a dispensary that happens to issue degrees, with no real prestige outside of the borders of the nation."

The mission itself has been drifting away from both types of institutions – public and private – while they fought. And every ranking system tells the same underlying story of a country home to 178 million people that has not produced a single institution inside the global top 500.



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The lives of medical students

A*STAR was not built in a decade by Singaporean pride. Fraunhofer was not designed for Bavarian nostalgia. Bangladesh, if it is to mean anything in the next century – a knowledge economy, a prospective industrial super-hub, and a country that manufactures its own answers instead of importing them – will mean public and private universities working on the same problems, in the same rooms, and with the same resources.

The country's leading public and private universities may frequently argue about which is the legitimate heir to the national academic mission. The question is what both might build together, lest we be ruled by division.

Reference:

The Daily Star (July 1, 2026). *DU gets no UGC research fund for first time.*

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