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Higher Education Taking Action Towards the Sustainable Development Goals:
Perspectives from Asia and Europe



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Research collaborations to achieve efficiency in policy implementations and student involvement in academia

Being brought up in a developing country, I was constantly faced with challenges. I grew up seeing poverty and inequality everywhere around me. I comprehended that only good quality education can solve many problems in my country. The possibility of an individual to excel in life comes from the sheer luck of being born to a privileged family. Children who are born to an underprivileged family gets into a poverty trap for the rest of their life, because we have built our society in a way that mostly people with enough money can succeed. I realised only through active and united work we can change how the world works at least in terms of achieving quality education in the future generations to come. I have been directly or indirectly involved with education related work. Given that my study background could also be related to my work, I eventually started working in educational research. This opinion article also relates around the topic of how we can increase the quality of research (mostly universities in developing and least developed countries) by efficiently involving students and researchers from universities in Europe and Asia; and how this process can eventually lead to achieving not only Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), but further. Given that I was born in Bangladesh and currently living in Germany, my opinion paper will be mostly based on the differences and experiences between these two countries.

There is a total of 60 private universities, 34 public universities and 3 international universities in Bangladesh (Mazumder, 2014). Most of them have little to no research facilities and opportunities for students and researchers. According to SCImago Journal & Country Rank, there were 990,389 citable documents published in 33 Asian countries in the year 2017, out of which 818,361 belongs to the top 4 (India, China, Japan and South Korea) and only 4,927 to Bangladesh. On the other hand, there were almost 1.1 million scientific publications from Europe, more evenly distributed among the top 10/15 countries (also note that the population density of European countries is much lower than Asian countries). Moreover, European universities have a large number of research institutions and opportunities where researchers actively participate and influence policies at the national and international level. Not only researchers, students are also involved and given the

chance to share their opinions. In Bangladesh, or many other Asian universities do not involve themselves in such practices. It says a lot about academic and university cultures on both continents. Since the European students are much more involved in such activities, they tend to have higher motivation and tend to be more driven to contribute to the changes in the society. In many Asian countries, having higher education is just the means to getting a better job in the future. However, student involvements in research in the university leads to higher satisfaction and more involvement in the university (Kim & Sax, 2009).

To measure the effectiveness and scale of the SDGs, there is no better alternative than research. By connecting students and researchers all over the world, it is possible to achieve these goals and further. To maintain a research culture, we have to build connections and platforms for students and professors to motivate them to get involved in research. The lack of growth of the research culture in most Asian countries makes a huge difference in implementing effective policies and maintaining transparency. Many countries fail to acquire international funds due to lack of such efficacy. It is clear that other than a few countries in Asia, most countries are not actively involved in research. A major reason for such differences in the research culture is because research and academic exchanges are not effectively practiced in most countries; including Bangladesh. However, the future does not have to be the same as the present. By actively involving young minds in research and motivating universities to build resources for research, we can build a research culture similar to European universities or even better. Research does not only help in measuring policies, it also helps in growth of new industries, ensure better quality of education and much more. Many studies show that student growth and social involvement is highly correlated with academic and co-curricular involvement in universities (Astin, 1985; Huang & Chang, 2004).

When it comes to universities and government in Bangladesh, there is a clear negligence about funding research and universities with resources for research. The usual statement for such ignorance is “we have so many other problems to worry about right now”. I do not disagree with that statement. However, I still believe that both parties can do a lot more than what they are doing right now. An Asia-Europe collaboration in research can bring in great outcomes in this aspect. This might sound like a hard thing to achieve, but based on the available technology and fast globalization of the world, it should not be a hard task for universities and governments. Universities can collaborate to exchange and encourage research in Asian countries. We can build platforms where students and researchers can get involved in projects in both the continents. Moreover, there are many hierarchical problems in academia which can also be solved if we manage to solve the heterogeneity in research in both the continents. Connecting researchers and students from both the continents should be a major focus for policy makers and governments. The world is getting more global and it will eventually become more homogenous than it is now. The important question is, do we wait and join the others, or do we take action now and be the front-runners?

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