



barbs aimed at them without being defensive or upset. They are the usual punching bags for popular jokes, ridicule or criticism. Civil servants (bureaucrats) are another group that faces public censure, albeit to a lesser extent. We often attack these two groups (politicians and bureaucrats), but our exercise of free speech in this regard has not yielded significant dividends in terms of our country's peace and prosperity.

It is not my intention to absolve politicians and bureaucrats of their insincerity and wickedness; they have their share of deficiencies and drawbacks. However, we all agree that they are not the backbone of a nation. This accolade (backbone) is generally awarded to a nation's teachers. When teachers fail to fulfil their core responsibilities, they undermine the very bedrock of a nation's future.

Instead of referring to all teachers in Bangladesh, in this essay, I will focus on the category to which I belong. This is because university teachers generally receive higher education and superior training and are arguably more capable — intellectually and in other ways. It is often the case that university teachers belong to the best of their cohorts in their undergraduate and postgraduate programs. Therefore, their roles are more consequential and worth investigating.

Being the best minds, university teachers are the intellectual leaders and agents of change in a country. Therefore, when they are found guilty of dereliction of duty, the negative effects are far more pervasive. Let's compare a country to a family where all members are not equally talented and skilled or equally capable of contributing to its wellbeing. If those who are considered family pillars — the strength or support system of the family — do not function well, all members will be negatively affected and the family will be on the brink of collapse. Similarly, when university teachers fall short of expectations or wilfully neglect their professional obligations, the entire nation suffers.

Therefore, to detect the problems Bangladesh faces and find solutions to its man-made calamities, it is important to know how university teachers fare in carrying out the responsibilities they are charged with.

Since I am critiquing my colleagues, I need to tread cautiously and avoid overgeneralisation. I must mention that many promising and established university academics in Bangladesh are making significant contributions to their fields despite facing many challenges and constraints. We must pay a fitting tribute to their tenacity, determination and achievements.

Regrettably, however, the grim reality is that the vast majority of university academics in Bangladesh stay away from their primary responsibilities and do not meaningfully engage in the tasks for which they are trained and employed. Most of them breach their professional obligations and duties to their students and to the nation.

Teaching is not the only responsibility of university academics. If it were so, they would have the same teaching loads and student contact hours as those of their counterparts in primary and secondary schools. In addition to teaching, university academics are especially tasked with conducting research and producing knowledge in their fields. Acquiring and disseminating knowledge should be their passion and lifelong commitment. The more time one invests in research and scholarship, the sharper their abilities become. Once an academic develops real interest in teaching, learning, research and writing, they dive deep into the oceans of knowledge and scholarship. When pulled into research, they have little time for superfluous [political](#) activities or continuous social media posts.

When a university teacher does not conduct research, it has negative implications for their teaching and students' learning. Such a teacher will simply transmit to learners what others have written and may not be able to provide meaningful insights through their pedagogical practices.

In what follows, I comment on the extent of passion most university academics in Bangladesh have for knowledge and scholarship, and on activities that consume most of their time. The following anecdotes may illustrate these points.

Last year, I hosted a friend — an Australian-Bangladeshi academic — for nearly two weeks. Even though we have been friends since our undergraduate years in the 1990s and met after a long time, we had no time for gossiping or chatting. We caught up with each other mainly over meals or while driving here and there in Kuala Lumpur. Both of us were busy researching and writing most of the time.

I know true academics find it hard to shut down their research and academic engagement even for days. But, are there many academics in Bangladesh who maintain an active research life? There are certainly honourable exceptions, but a blunt answer to this question may not be very pleasing.

About a year ago, an academic friend from Bangladesh included me in a WhatsApp group whose hundreds of members are mostly university

academics based in Bangladesh. I have been horrified to see the topics of their discussion in the group. Almost 100 per cent of their discussion centres around politics and related discussion. Certainly, politics can be discussed from an academic perspective, but I have seen no such scholarly slant in their exchanges. Unfortunately, there is no difference between the content of this WhatsApp group of university academics and the discussion of semi-educated or uneducated people.

This becomes especially evident during election periods. Regrettably, the way many teachers at Bangladeshi universities engage in electioneering and chasing voters during general election campaigns blurs the difference between them and the general run of people.

When university teachers waste their time in activities that others can do and are doing, this augurs a significant loss for a country. The primary responsibilities of university academics — teaching and research — are both arduous and immensely rewarding. They should stay focused on these important responsibilities. If they remain preoccupied with activities ordinary people do daily, their higher education is wasted; it is also a waste of talents, expertise and resources for the country. Our country has to depend on knowledge produced by others primarily because the potential of this talented pool of human resources — university academics — is wasted on less important activities, not on producing knowledge.

One common complaint is that university teachers lack adequate funding for their research. This is undoubtedly a legitimate concern, but many research projects require willingness and academic ability more than financial support. What most university academics in Bangladesh need is the passion for and commitment to knowledge. Once they embrace scholarship as their life's calling, there can be ways of overcoming research-related material obstacles.

Unfortunately, what I have noticed among most university academics in Bangladesh is a thirst for promotion, material rewards, perks and privileges — not for knowledge and scholarship. The desperation for privileged access to the corridors of power is palpable among some of them. They are not meeting the expectations of their profession or of society, thus letting the country down.

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