

Challenges of Education Sector in Bangladesh and Way-out to Advance Specialized Skills in Higher Maritime Education

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Source: <https://e1c.educ.ubc.ca>

Bangladesh allocates less than 2% of its GDP to education, positioning it among the lower end of education spending in the Asia-Pacific region. In contrast, the regional average for public spending on education is around 4% of GDP, with some countries like Tonga investing as much as 8% (Habib & Alamgir, 2024). This limited investment impacts the quality and availability of all types of education, hindering the broader socio-economic development of Bangladesh. To develop its education sector to a satisfactory level, Bangladesh needs to significantly increase its investment, improve infrastructure, and focus on teachers'/ trainers' training, including curriculum development, particularly both for general and specialized education at maritime institutions. Addressing these issues is vital for advancing the country's human capital and supporting its blue economy initiatives, which are being widely talked about these days in most of the seminars and symposiums.

Education Sector of Bangladesh in General

One of the noteworthy issues with the education sector of Bangladesh lies in the quality of education. There are glaring

disparities in access to education between urban and rural areas, since rural regions often lacking adequate school facilities and qualified teachers. Access to higher education remains limited, particularly for students from low-income families and remote areas. There are hardly any functional quality assurance cells in most of the educational institutions. The curriculum is often outdated and not aligned with the skills needed in the modern job market. Many schools, particularly in rural areas, lack basic facilities such as safe buildings, good laboratories, electricity, clean water, and sanitation. There is a shortage of textbooks and learning materials, and where available, they are often not distributed equitably. Access to technology and digital resources is limited too that exacerbating inequalities in education quality between urban and rural areas. There are gaps between policy formulation and implementation. The net enrollment rate at the primary level is around 98%, but the completion rate is lower. The net enrollment rate at the secondary level is about 62%, with significant dropout rates and the enrollment rate in higher education is around 17%, reflecting limited access and capacity (Asian Development Bank, 2021).

Despite having a weak foundation in the education sector, the government of Bangladesh has undertaken a new initiative to expand its maritime education systems in Bangladesh, which is encouraging. The number of institutes related to maritime education have been increased. The highest seat of maritime education now in Bangladesh is the recently formed maritime university named BSMRMU, which is the first dedicated maritime university in the country. It is supposed to take a role as a central hub for all sorts of maritime education, training, research, and development. It is designated as a specialized university by the official gazette. It should be nominated as a research university to lead from the front of all types of maritime research in Bangladesh. An institute like the Bangladesh Institute of Maritime Research and Development (BIMRAD) should have strong links with central maritime universities with more dedicated research fellows of their own. The maritime university has to upgrade its ranking by keeping pace with its vision.

Another important fact is that research budget for all public universities is funded by the University Grants Commission (UGC). UGC annual reports show that the amount of money allocated to different public universities, including BSMRMU, for research on maritime and oceanic matters is very scanty. As a result, it is difficult to conduct good research with dispersed diminutive sums of money.

Areas that Upset Higher Education

Universities in Bangladesh often face challenges due to the not-up-to-mark level of their intake. Many of the students entering universities often lack foundational knowledge and critical thinking skills about the ocean, which makes it difficult to grasp advanced concepts. As a result, universities need to invest in remedial courses to bridge these gaps, which strains resources and delays progress in regular curricula. Poor early education affects students' research skills, resulting in lower-quality academic output. University faculty must spend extra time on basic education, diverting focus from research and advanced teaching. Improving primary and secondary education is thus crucial for enhancing the overall quality and effectiveness of higher education in Bangladesh. As per UGC's instructions, public universities in Bangladesh are supposed to carry out research. Again, teachers who are capable and competent to conduct research are often directly or indirectly engaged with consultancy services either personally or through the university administration. These influence them to be out of focus from their primary duties of teaching and research within the universities. Lack of good governance and weak administration often create chaos in the university arena on various occasions and affect the academic environment.

Specialized Education Offers Crucial Opportunities for Blue Economy

To be a developed maritime country, Bangladesh needs to effectively mature the maritime industry and support the growth of its blue economy. Bangladesh has strong growth potential

due to its strategic location, young workforce, and prospective shipbuilding industry. With proper investment and policy support, it can become a more significant player in the global maritime industry.

It is, therefore, essential to identify and cultivate the necessary skills and competencies in areas that the authority would recognize as vital for economic development through the creation of new job opportunities. Creating new courses in demanding fields and closing unattractive courses should be a practice to maintain the standard of the institute and minimize the waste of resources.

University-Industry Collaboration and Infrastructure Development

Globally the maritime industry encompassing shipbuilding, ship repair, ship breaking, port operations, maritime services, and logistics are expanding both in size and value. As of 2019, the total value of the annual world shipping trade had reached more than 14 trillion US Dollars (International Chamber of Shipping, 2019). There are opportunities to expand the shipbuilding industry on the already available basic elements of shipbuilding in Bangladesh. The shipping business is also gradually expanding. The local ship owners are now being motivated to invest more than USD 12 Billion freight market available with Bangladesh. In the last year, the contribution of the Bangladeshi ship owners was more than US \$600 million (Bangladesh Bank). However, there is a shortage of skilled manpower and entrepreneurs in Bangladesh to compete in the global market.

University and Academia collaboration is more or less overlooked in Bangladesh. Fostering partnerships between educational institutions, industry stakeholders, and government agencies is important to align education and training with industry needs. It will encourage industry input in curriculum design and provide platforms for industry-academia collaboration. Representatives from the industries may be engaged as joint supervisors for research. It is necessary to invest in training facilities, simulation labs, and research centers to provide high-quality education and practical training. By identifying and developing the necessary skills and competencies, Bangladesh can enhance its maritime industry and fully leverage the opportunities within its blue economy. Emphasis on higher education, training, and continuous professional development will ensure a skilled workforce capable of driving sustainable growth and innovation in the maritime sector.

Attracting Talents and Their Retention for the Maritime Sector

Attracting and retaining talent in the maritime sector is critical for sustaining growth and competitiveness. Strategies to achieve this goal may include enhancing awareness and perception through campaigns. There is a need to launch campaigns targeting young people, highlighting the exciting and rewarding careers in the maritime industry. The public service

commission has to take leading responsibility for building new career opportunities in the maritime sector. Success stories of successful maritime professionals may be shared to inspire potential candidates. There is a need to include maritime topics in school curricula to build early interest. The promotion of the maritime industry as a modern and high-tech field is essential, countering outdated perceptions.

Advancing the Educational and Training Institutes

Comprehensive curriculum development is of paramount importance for maritime higher education. Specialized programs need to be regularly designed and updated with changing circumstances in the job market. Incorporation of hands-on trainings, internships, and simulations to provide real-world experience is highly beneficial. Scholarships to students pursuing maritime studies, especially targeting underrepresented groups. Provide financial assistance and loan programs to reduce the economic barriers to entering the maritime field. Regular training and up skilling programs to keep professionals updated with the latest industry developments. Promote certification programs that recognize and validate specialized skills and knowledge. Establishing mentorship programs pairing experienced professionals with newcomers to guide their career development is useful. Competitive compensation and benefits are of immense value. There is a need to implement programs to recognize and reward employees' contributions and achievements in maritime field.

Maritime professionals need to be equipped with modern tools and technology to enhance their work efficiency and satisfaction. The availability of research vessels has been a long-cherished need for maritime professionals. The size and specification of the vessels have to be decided by concerned stakeholders through careful study. Universities and research institutes need to be well organized with an adequate number of scientists (professors) to create innovation labs and incubators to foster a culture of creativity and technological advancement. Training programs are to be planned to improve digital literacy and proficiency in using industry-specific software and technology. There have to be endeavors to encourage familiarity with automation and AI applications in the maritime industry to stay ahead of technological trends. Public-Private Partnerships and collaboration with industry is important. Partner with private companies to provide internships and apprenticeships, offering students practical experience. Bangladesh government's new initiative (through an official gazette) to provide internship support to graduates at government /semi-government and autonomous organizations has been appreciated by different professionals (Ministry of Public Administration, 2023). The policy needs to be formed to provide internships to selected prospective final-year students at specialized universities. Engagement of universities in joint research and development initiatives would result in pragmatic innovation opportunities. Authorities of training and educational institutes have to build a system to seek enhanced government and private funding and grants to support educational programs

and infrastructure development. International collaboration may open new prospects and opportunities to expose students and professionals to global best practices.

Recommendations

Addressing the existing challenges in Bangladesh's education sector requires a multifaceted approach that includes increasing funding, improving teachers' training, updating the curriculum, strengthening governance, promoting inclusiveness, and engaging communities. By tackling these issues comprehensively, Bangladesh can enhance the quality of its education system and better prepare its workforce for the future. Again, to attract and retain talents in the maritime sector, authorities need to continuously enhance awareness -building initiatives, provide robust educational and training opportunities, offer internships with competitive compensation and benefits, and foster a positive work environment. Additionally, leveraging technology, forming public-private partnerships, and engaging in international collaboration are crucial steps to ensure the development of a skilled and motivated maritime workforce. By addressing these areas, Bangladesh should build a strong pool of human resources to support its growing blue economy. Given the strategic importance of the blue economy to Bangladesh's future, a substantial emphasis on maritime education is imperative. By investing in comprehensive educational initiatives, Bangladesh ought to build a skilled workforce capable of driving sustainable growth and ensuring the long-term success of its blue economy.

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