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Transforming Private Universities in Bangladesh into Research Driven Institutions: Barriers, Opportunities, and Strategic Pathways

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Paper ID: ICEBTM-25-1129

Abstract- **Academic research is crucial for creating knowledge, driving innovation, and supporting national growth. This study investigates the barriers, opportunities, and strategies for supporting sustainable research in private universities. It uses a mixed-methods approach that includes interviews with university leaders, faculty, staff, and policy experts, along with a survey of academic staff from various institutions.**

The findings show several significant challenges: low funding, no clear research policies in institutions, high teaching loads, and little professional development. There is also a weak connection to national priorities, along with a lack of infrastructure and incentives. However, there are emerging opportunities. More early-career faculty and students are showing interest in research. Digital platforms, global collaboration, and visionary leadership can help integrate research into university missions. The study suggests that increasing investment in faculty development, creating strong institutional frameworks, and enhancing industry-academia partnerships can help transform private universities into important contributors to Bangladesh's knowledge-driven future.

Keywords- **Faculty development, research barriers and opportunities, sustainable academic research.**

I.INTRODUCTION

Academic research is the foundation of higher education. It drives knowledge creation, technological progress, and socio-economic development. Around the world, universities are seen as centers of innovation and contributors to national growth. In Bangladesh, private universities have quickly increased access to higher education since they started in the early 1990s. However, their ability to produce impactful and lasting research is still limited compared to public universities.

Several challenges hold back research productivity in private universities. These include inadequate funding, limited research facilities, heavy teaching and administrative loads, and a lack of clear research policies. Additionally, weak connections with national research priorities and industry make it harder for them to create knowledge that supports development goals.

Despite these challenges, there are opportunities. Growing research interest among early-career faculty and students, the availability of digital tools, the possibility of global

collaboration, and strong leadership can help improve research capacity.

Around the world, academic research is acknowledged as a foundational pillar of university performance. Research does not only make innovation but also raise institutional reputation, draw global collaborations, and contribute directly to community development [1]. The combination of research with teaching ensures that curricula remain vibrant and reflective of emerging knowledge frontiers [2]. For developing countries like Bangladesh, strengthening research within universities is necessary to deal with local challenges—from public health and education to environmental sustainability and business-industrial development.

After the Private University Act rolled out in 1992, Bangladesh has witnessed a rapid proliferation of private universities. As of 2025, there are over 110 private universities, educating more than 60% of the country's tertiary-level students. Despite this growth, critics say these institutions are prioritizing enrollment-driven revenue models over research investments [3]. Several studies have pointed to poor research infrastructure, the absence of an institutional research plan, and regulators who look the other way [4]. A broader review of literature across South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa reveals a general limitation on sustainable academic research in the private higher education sector. These include inadequate research funds, poor or no policy frameworks, low faculty inspiration due to lack of incentives, and minimal collaboration between academic circles and industry [5]. In many cases, research activities are performed as isolated initiatives by individuals rather than as part of an articulate institutional plan.

Despite these challenges, emerging literature also highlights opportunities for transformation. The digital age has made it unthinkingly easy to team up for low-cost research collaboration and data collection [6]. The international financial support organization and intellectual society are increasingly investing in South-South and North-South research with joint ventures. In addition, new generations of faculty, many of whom studied abroad or
were exposed to global research customs, are showing strong interest in
integrating research into their academic identity. These improvements propose that with appropriate strategic support, private universities in Bangladesh could represent their position in national development through research.

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This paper looks at the barriers, opportunities, and strategies for turning private universities in Bangladesh into research-focused institutions. It uses a mixed-methods approach that combines qualitative and quantitative analysis.

II. METHODOLOGY

To explore the barriers, opportunities, and pathways for sustainable academic research in private universities in Bangladesh, this study uses a mixed-methods research design. This method combines qualitative insights and quantitative evidence, which improves the validity and applicability of the findings.

A. Research Design

The study combines qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews with university administrators, senior faculty members, and policymakers, along with quantitative data gathered through structured surveys administered to academic staff in selected private universities. This design allows for data triangulation and offers a multi-dimensional view of the institutional, structural, and policy-related challenges and opportunities.

B. Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling method selected participants from ten private universities in Bangladesh. Institutions were chosen based on: age (established versus newer universities), Research activity (based on UGC annual reports [7] and institutional websites) and willingness to participate in the study. The participants included 15 administrators and policy experts (e.g., vice-chancellors, deans, directors of research), 25 faculty members from various disciplines for qualitative interviews, and 100 survey respondents (academic staff from diverse departments)

C. Data Collection Tools

Data was collected through interview guide covered topics such as institutional research strategy, challenges faced, leadership engagement, funding mechanisms, and collaboration initiatives. Survey Questionnaire included Likert-scale items on research infrastructure, teaching workload, funding access, training/professional development, attitudes toward research and incentives and barriers. The survey was given both online and in person.

D. Data Analysis

Qualitative data was analyzed using thematic analysis, which allows patterns and insights to emerge from interview transcripts. Codes were created both deductively (from literature) and inductively (from data). Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and inferential techniques to validate and complement the qualitative findings. SPSS software processed statistical data.

E. Limitations

The study offers valuable insights, including its limitations, such as, non-random sampling, which may affect applicability, self-reported data, which may present
response bias, focus on urban institutions, potentially excluding rural perspectives. Despite these limitations, the study provides a strong foundation for understanding the complex dynamics of research sustainability in the private university sector of Bangladesh.

III. RESULTS

This section shares the findings from interviews and surveys. The information is organized around the main themes of barriers, opportunities, and strategic pathways for research development in private universities.

TABLE I
KEY BARRIERS TO RESEARCH IN PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES

S. L	Barrier	Frequency (%)	Interpretation
1	Inadequate funding	78	Major constraint across most institutions.
2	Lack of institutional policies	65	Weak research governance.
3	Heavy teaching workload	72	Limits faculty time for research.
4	Limited professional development	58	Insufficient training and mentorship.
5	Weak alignment with national priorities	60	Research often disconnected from policy goals.

Source: Survey instrument
Notes: Data has been compiled by the researcher

Distribution of research interest among faculty

The distribution of research interests shows clear generational differences. Early career faculties are more engaged in research, with most reporting high or moderate interest. In contrast, senior faculties show lower levels of research involvement. This trend highlights the need for specific initiatives to build capacity and support the research potential of younger academics.

The qualitative interviews supported these findings. For example, one faculty member noted, "*Our teaching load is so heavy that pursuing meaningful research becomes almost impossible*." Similarly, policy experts highlighted the absence of clear institutional frameworks to guide research agendas.

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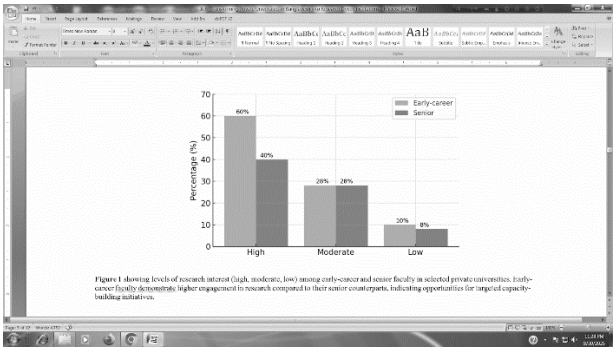


Fig. 1. Distribution of Research Interest among Faculty

Figure 1 Showing levels of research interest (high, moderate, low) among early-career and senior faculty in selected private universities. Early career faculty show more engagement in research than their senior counterparts. This indicates opportunities for targeted capacity-building efforts.

TABLE II
EMERGING OPPORTUNITIES FOR RESEARCH DEVELOPMENT IN PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES

S.L	Opportunity	Frequency (%)	Interpretation
1	Growing interest among early-career faculty	70	Younger academics show higher motivation for research.
2	Student engagement in research	55	Increasing participation in research projects.
3	Digital platforms and resources	62	Online tools enabling access to research materials and collaboration.
4	International collaborations	48	Partnerships with foreign universities and organizations are expanding.
5	Visionary institutional leadership	40	Some leaders actively integrating research into missions

Source: Survey instrument
Notes: Data has been compiled by the researcher

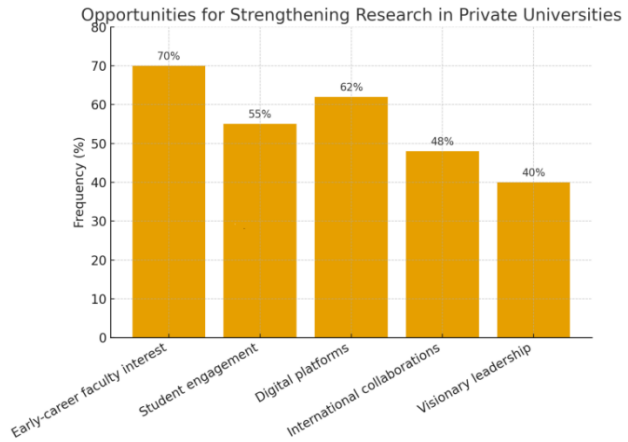


Fig.2. Opportunities for Strengthening Research in Private Universities

A simple clustered chart can show how often each opportunity occurs. This adds to the barriers figure and provides a clear comparison of constraints and possibilities.

This figure shows the relative frequency of emerging opportunities in private universities.

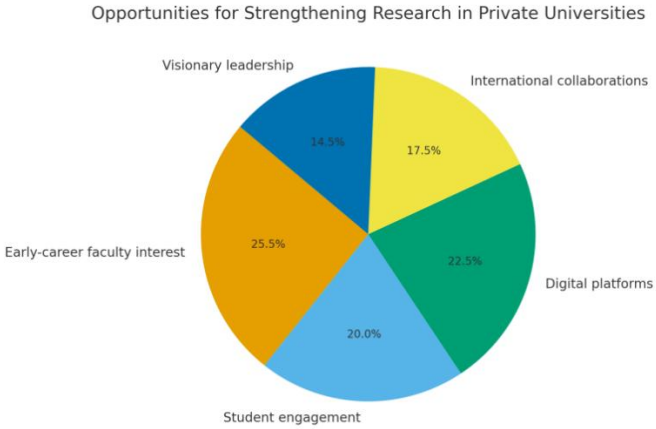


Fig. 3. Opportunities for strengthening research in private universities

A simple clustered bar or pie chart can show how often each opportunity occurs.

TABLE III
CORRELATIONS BETWEEN INSTITUTIONAL VARIABLES AND RESEARCH OUTCOMES

Variable Pair	Correlation Coefficient (r)	Interpretation
Research infrastructure ↔ Faculty output	0.72*	Very highly positive
Leadership support ↔ Faculty motivation	0.65*	Highly positive
Teaching load ↔ Research productivity	–0.81*	Very highly negative
Access to professional development ↔ Research confidence	0.58*	Highly positive

*Indicate significance at 1% level
Source: Survey instrument
Notes: Data has been compiled by the researcher

These correlations strongly support the qualitative findings. For instance, the very high negative relationship between teaching load and productivity (r = –0.81) shows how excessive teaching responsibilities hurt research activity. Similarly, leadership support has a positive link with faculty motivation (r = 0.65), confirming that strong leadership is an important factor.

The findings suggest that, although structural challenges like underfunding, poor infrastructure, and high workloads are common, there is significant potential within the academic community. With focused policy support and strong leadership, private universities in

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Bangladesh can become research-driven institutions, making valuable contributions to national innovation and development goals.

IV. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight a contradiction in Bangladesh's private higher education sector. While private universities have rapidly increased and now makeup the majority of university enrollment, their role in national research output remains limited. The following discussion places these findings within a broader context and examines ways to promote sustainable academic research in line with national and global priorities.

A. Interpreting Barriers in the Institutional Context

This study identifies systemic barriers similar to those reported in other parts of the Global South. Limited institutional research funding, heavy teaching loads and the absence of formal research strategies reflect earlier findings [5], [3] in Bangladesh. These challenges indicate a continuation of teaching-focused models in private higher education, where research is undervalued in terms of both resources and institutional culture.
The strong negative relationship between teaching loads and research productivity ($r = –0.81$) supports the idea that institutional priorities need to shift to prioritize research. Without implementing balanced workloads, private universities will struggle to fully contribute to the knowledge economy.

B. Aligning with Global and National Research Trends

Around the world, research focused on sustainability is increasingly important across various fields such as science, technology, social sciences, business, and humanities [8]. Bangladesh's National Research and Innovation Strategy also call for more involvement from private institutions in tackling local development challenges, including climate adaptation, urbanization, education reform, and industry innovation.

Even with supportive policies, a misalignment between institutional strategies and national research priorities limits private universities' participation. Few institutions currently have systems in place to connect national goals with practical research agendas. Bridging this gap is crucial for making meaningful contributions to sustainable research.

C. The Role of Visionary Leadership and Institutional Culture

Qualitative interviews and correlation data show the significant impact of effective leadership. Institutions led by research-focused administrators had higher faculty engagement, better use of funds, and more visibility in partnerships. These findings are consistent with Maringe and Sing [6], who emphasizes the role of leadership in fostering a research culture through policies, incentives, and capacity-building initiatives.
In Bangladesh, where institutional autonomy varies and external accountability is low, leadership plays a key role in prioritizing research. Promoting visionary leadership at all levels—departmental, faculty, and administrative—is essential for driving lasting institutional change.

D. Opportunities as Levers of Strategic Change

Despite many barriers, clear opportunities for change exist. Young faculty interest in research, access to digital platforms, and potential for international partnerships is "low-cost, high impact" chances that institutional leaders can exploit.

Moreover, collaboration between industry and academia is still underused but holds promise. With Bangladesh's expanding IT, textile, and agribusiness sectors, private universities can serve as research partners for sustainable industry innovation.

This discussion highlights that nurturing sustainable academic research in private universities calls for systemic change, strategic vision, and a robust culture of inquiry. By aligning institutional priorities with national goals, encouraging faculty involvement, and taking advantage of digital and international opportunities, the existing research gap can be closed. To help Bangladesh transition to a knowledge-based economy, private universities should change from being primarily teaching institutions into vibrant research driven institutions that meaningfully contribute to sustainable development.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

To transform private universities in Bangladesh into lively research-driven institutions, a multi-layered approach involving institutional, regulatory, and collaborative strategies is needed. Based on the findings and analysis, the following recommendations are proposed:

A. Institutional-Level Recommendations

i. Develop and Implement Research Strategies

Each private university should create a clear institutional research strategy, outlining its research priorities, funding distribution, faculty engagement plans, and connection to national development goals. To establish research and innovation, strengthen current ones to oversee and support research activities.

ii) Reduce Teaching Loads for Active Research Faculty

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Policies should be introduced for balancing teaching and research that allocate qualified or research-focused faculty to have lighter course loads or less administrative duty. Research should include expectations in faculty evaluation and promotion processes.

iii) Strengthen Research Infrastructure

University should invest in necessary research infrastructure like access to journals, data analysis software, research labs, and collaborative platforms. Also encourage the use of digital tools, such as online databases, e-learning platforms, and cloud-based research tools.

iv) Establish Internal Research Funding Mechanisms

Universities should introduce competitive internal research grants, especially aimed at junior faculty and interdisciplinary projects. A specific portion of minimum percentage of the university's operational budget (e.g., 2–5%) should be reserved for faculty-led research and innovation.

v) Build a Research Culture

University should organize regular seminars, conferences, and research workshops to promote academic inquiry. Senior researchers should engage mentorship programs that connect with early-career academics.

B. National and Policy-Level Recommendations

i) Incentivize Private Sector Participation in National Research Programs

The University Grants Commission (UGC) and Ministry of Education should provide private universities to access public research funding, especially for projects related to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

ii) Enhance Regulatory Support

The Private University Act should include required research performance indicators and incentives. Require universities to publish annual research reports and contribute to national research databases.

iii) Foster Capacity Building through Training Programs

Nationwide professional development programs (in partnership with public universities or international organization) should be focused on research methods, grant writing, publication ethics, and data management.

C. Collaboration and Industry Engagement

i) Strengthen Industry-Academia Partnerships

Universities should encourage collaborative research projects with the textile, technology, agriculture, and

pharmaceutical sectors, focusing on sustainable innovation. Dedicated university-industry liaison offices should be facilitating joint ventures, consultancy services, and internships.

ii. Promote International Research Collaboration

Universities should develop memorandum of understandings (MoUs) with foreign universities and research centers for joint publications, faculty exchanges, and virtual symposiums. Use global platforms to secure funding and expand academic networks.

These recommendations, if implemented thoughtfully, can transform private universities in Bangladesh from teaching-focused institutions to centers of research and innovation. By embedding research into their core missions, investing in capacity, and engaging with industry and global partners, these universities can make meaningful contributions to national development and global sustainability goals.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study has investigated the main hurdles, new chances, and ways to turn private universities in Bangladesh into sustainable research centers. The findings reveal serious structural issues, such as underfunding, poor institutional planning, and heavy teaching workload that have often pushed research to the background in the private sector. Still, the study points out strong reasons for change, such as growing research interest among young faculty, the rise of digital tools, and the potential for collaboration across sectors and internationally.

As Bangladesh shifts towards a knowledge-based economy, private universities need to change from just teaching to becoming centers for research and innovation. This change is essential for maintaining institutional credibility and competing globally. It also aligns with national development goals and the UN Sustainable Development Agenda.

This study reveals that transforming private universities in Bangladesh into sustainable academic research-driven institutions is possible, but it needs strategic investments, supportive policies, visionary leadership, and a long-term commitment to creating knowledge. If these steps are met, private universities in Bangladesh can play a significant role in the future of research and development.

ISBN 978-984-35-5270-9 *https://icebtm.iub.edu.bd*

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ISBN 978-984-35-5270-9 *https://icebtm.iub.edu.bd*