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## In Bangladesh, a New University Gives Women a Shot at Leadership



*Asian U. for Women*

The curriculum at the Asian U. for Women is modeled on that of Oxford and other elite institutions. For 15 teaching positions advertised by the Bangladeshi start-up, the provost says she received more than 1,000 applications from Australia, Canada, Europe, and the United States.

*By Shailaja Neelakantan*  
Chittagong, Bangladesh

Parwana Fayyaz, a young woman from Afghanistan's Taliban-controlled Ghazni province and a student here at the Asian University for Women, strode confidently to the microphone on stage to tell a room full of students, professors, and donors about her hopes for Afghan women. For the next 10 minutes, she delivered a fiery address.

A freshman at the three-year-old university, Ms. Fayyaz talked about how fear played a big part in Afghan women's lives and how she feels lucky that, as a student here, she no longer has to see the bodies of dead women that are sometimes left on the streets back home. "We have to free Afghan women from fear," said Ms. Fayyaz to enthusiastic applause. "We want the world to hear us that we are not ashamed to be Afghan women." Ms. Fayyaz is an example of how the university is working to turn its 297 students into leaders who can help resolve centuries-old conflicts in their homelands and create a more equitable environment for women.

The Asian University for Women is the brainchild of Kamal Ahmed, 46, who grew up in Bangladesh and spent years working at leading international-development organizations in the United States. His idea for the university came in 2000 after he realized that regions of the world that have forged ahead on the human-development index, a statistic developed by the United Nations to measure social and economic growth, have all benefited from an increasing number of educated women who have led cultural and political change.

"The history of this part of the world has been an unending series of conflicts based on ethnicity, religion, or language," says Mr. Ahmed. "All the promises of change seem to be based on reinventing their sense of community."

After nine years of raising money and recruiting faculty and administrators, he opened the institution's preparatory Access Academy in 2008 and offered the first undergraduate class in 2009. Today the university, in the port city of Chittagong, has undergraduates from 11 countries—Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam—and the Palestinian territories. An additional 119 students attend its Access Academy, which provides required preparatory courses in English, mathematics, and basic sciences.

With the overall goal of solving deep-seated social problems, the university encourages students to connect their theoretical study with contemporary issues and challenges facing Asia and the world. It offers majors in Asian studies; biology; environmental sciences; public health; and politics, philosophy, and economics. The curriculum, which is modeled on courses at the University of Oxford, the University of Chicago, and other elite institutions, includes courses in rhetoric and writing to ensure that students can engage in political debates and present persuasive speeches like the one Ms. Fayyaz delivered.

Already, students are putting in practice what they've learned. Tamil and Sinhalese students from war-torn Sri Lanka traveled together to their island country to help reconcile their two ethnic groups. The trip included planting flowers at cemeteries, visiting places of worship, and organizing cricket matches between mixed teams. "We saw that the microcosm of solidarity we were building in Chittagong translated more widely," says Mr. Ahmed. "It was a very, very powerful act."

### **'A Force of Nature'**

A soft-spoken man with a Zen-like calm, Mr. Ahmed has been able to rally big-name supporters to his cause, including Bill and Melinda Gates, the Nobel Peace Prize laureate Muhammad Yunus, and Cherie Blair, a leading international human-rights advocate who is also the wife of a former British prime minister, Tony Blair.

"Kamal is a force of nature," says Jack Meyer, chairman of the Asian University for Women Support Foundation, the university's fund-raising arm, and a former chief executive of the Harvard Management Company, which oversees Harvard University's endowment. "When somebody said they met Jack, it doesn't mean a lot, but when you've met Kamal, he's probably got you. He has a big heart, and he's smart, and so he's very good at making these connections."

Indeed, Ms. Blair was named the university's chancellor in January. She says that on a visit to Afghanistan while her husband was prime minister, women there told her that for girls' education to matter in the country, it had to be promoted more broadly in Asia. "So the idea of a university which is unashamedly elitist and wants to get the best girls to become the leaders of tomorrow was an idea that appealed to me," says Ms. Blair.

Despite the commitment of people like Ms. Blair, the university has had trouble attracting academics and administrators, with a revolving door of top officials as it opened. "You know we are a start-up in a developing country," explains Mr. Ahmed. "We don't have the resources or systems in place as that of old venerable institutions. Originally our hope was that women's colleges in the U.S. would be helpful, but other than Bryn Mawr College, not a single women's college has supported us." Bryn Mawr and the Rockefeller Foundation paid for the university's second annual symposium, in Dhaka in January.

Jane D. McAuliffe, president of Bryn Mawr College, who attended the event, says she wants to work with the new university because she sees parallels between it and her institution. "There's a real desire to instill in students the importance of becoming change agents in their own societies," Ms. McAuliffe says, "and that's exactly what we do at Bryn Mawr."

Now that the university is finding its footing, it is having success in recruiting faculty members and managers, including people from Australia and the United States. In July the university named as provost Mary Sansalone, 52, a former dean of engineering and applied sciences at Washington University in St. Louis and a former vice provost for academic programs at Cornell University. A colleague brought her the advertisement for the position and told her, "Mary, this has your name written all over it," Ms. Sansalone recalls, smiling. "I love to build new programs, and being an engineer, I have spent a lot of time working on behalf of women and trying to open doors for women in engineering. So an all-women's college in South Asia is attractive." For 15 positions advertised by the university, Ms. Sansalone says she got more than a 1,000 applications from Australia, Canada, Europe, and the United States. While the university has senior professors from institutions like the elite Indian Institutes of Technology and Tufts University, it tends to attract younger faculty members. "That is tremendous because they are open and flexible to an environment like this," says Ms. Sansalone. "They give a tremendous amount to our students."

### **Inspirational Students**

For new faculty members, it is a learning experience as well as valuable cultural exposure to a country that is close to the world's two emerging giants, India and China. "This is my first teaching position, and to be part of shaping things is great," says Amber Wise, an assistant professor of chemistry. Ms. Wise, who earned a Ph.D. from the University of California at Berkeley, says she is still coping with the challenges of working in a developing country. For instance, procuring lab materials can be difficult. "I've spent nights buying coconut oil from Chittagong stores" for experiments, she says, laughing.

But the benefits outweigh the difficulties, and faculty members here often say they are inspired by their students. "I delight in the fact that they have such awe while they are learning," says Brenda Kranz, a biology professor from Australia.

During a recent class on world literature, Joanne Nystrom Janssen, an assistant literature professor, held a sharp discussion with almost all the students participating, seemingly unfazed by Ms. Blair, who sat in a red-printed *shalwar kameez* on the classroom's back benches. Tuition is \$10,000, but 95 percent of the students are on full scholarships. Mr. Ahmed hopes over time to be able to recruit more students paying the full fee to help support the institution's annual budget, which today is about \$10-million. "That's a critical pillar for sustaining the institution. We want to be competitive. The last thing we want this institution to be is an orphanage. We want to attract the best talent, rich or poor," he says. The university is seeking funds to construct a new campus, for which the Bangladesh government donated land. A more immediate need is \$22-million for an academic facility it is building to house its operations starting in 2013. The university's board says it needs \$12-million in hand to start construction of the main building. So far the university has only \$6.5-million, so it has started with landscaping and laying the foundation. "Look, \$5.5-million is one phone call [away] if it comes from the right person, and we have many irons in the fire," says Mr. Meyer. His comment may seem like bravado, but just a few hours earlier a Kuwaiti man donated \$500,000. "I just met him for the first time today," says Mr. Meyer.

In the next two to four years, the university wants to start offering graduate studies in management, environmental sciences, and engineering; to double the number of faculty members; and to earn accreditation from the New England Association of Schools and Colleges. With the institution set to graduate its first class in 2013, students are confident the university will give them the education and skills to make a difference. "We will be a big opportunity for everyone, even faculty," says Bayan Salaiimeh, a freshman from the Palestinian territories. "This place will get attention from the outside world."

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