

University aims to empower Asian females to play a bigger role in the region, writes **Mimi Lau**

Nurturing women to take the lead

Poverty, race, religion and social standing are irrelevant if you're a student at the Asian University for Women in Chittagong, Bangladesh. This is an institution with a difference – on a mission to empower women to change the region and the world.

"If you have the courage, even if you don't have shoes, we will take you on," said Kamal Ahmad, president and chief executive of the university's support foundation.

"When so much of the world has been subject to connections and privilege, we want to stand for openness."

Just six months ago the foundation was struggling to push forward with the university, which still had no vice-chancellor, building or students. But, miraculously, it welcomed 130 students from Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Cambodia and Nepal two weeks ago, pledging to offer a first-class liberal arts education.

Delaying the ground-breaking US\$400 million project was "simply not an option", said Mr Ahmad, who conceptualised the university at the turn of the millennium, when he was the co-director of the Task Force on Higher Education and Society, convened by the World Bank and Unesco. He was determined to press ahead with the plan despite the lack of a campus site.

"The women of Asia could not wait – every day lost in waiting was irreparably lost. We believe the greatest impediment to social and economic change in the region is the lack of effective leadership," the former lawyer said.

So the university opened its doors in a leased building 15-minutes' drive from a 42-hectare site donated by the Bangladeshi government that will eventually house a state-of-the-art campus.

Mr Ahmad said the university's aim was to identify talented women from Asia, united by a common vision to bring about change, who could go on to become leaders in their home countries.

The current students are on full scholarships and were hand-picked from more than 1,200 applicants nationwide, mostly from poor and rural areas. Many come from places where there is a stigma attached to tertiary education for women, the expectation being that they would marry young.

Mr Ahmad said the status of women in rural areas had been largely unaffected by economic progress in Asia.

"A poor man may mean just that – a poor man, whereas a poor woman may mean a whole poor family because it affects the children and the next generation in a way that can be crippling.

"By the same token improved economic and educational conditions for women can uplift a whole family."

Mahilini Kailaiyangirichelvam, 21, comes from war-torn Jaffna in



Sri Lankan students at the Asian University for Women in Chittagong, Bangladesh, rehearse a dance for the welcoming ceremony. Photos: Mimi Lau

northern Sri Lanka. Despite being an excellent student, she was forced out of schools since the age of 10 because of the fighting. She was offered a half-scholarship to study in Singapore but chose the Asian University for Women instead.

"The diversity and emphasis on social sciences will help me devote myself to working on raising awareness of important issues such as reproduction," she said.

The only student from a Bangladeshi ethnic-minority group, Papia Tanchangya, 19, was looking forward to mixing with students from around the region.

"I know going to university is good for my future career. My tolerance and understanding increases when getting to know people from many different countries," she said.

Neeru Ghale, 21, from Dharan in Nepal, who was a teacher in an English-medium school, said it was vital women were encouraged to enter higher education.

"They're the ones who make a home and care for children. If

they're educated, everyone will be educated." She hoped her younger sister would join her next year.

Saiqa Rani, 25, from Gujranwala, Pakistan, said girls were not encouraged to leave home, especially for study, where she came from. Her aim was to start a non-governmental organisation to promote young people's rights.

"The single-sex university is teaching in English so it will help me to overcome language barriers. I'll need English skills in the future to start the NGO," she said.

Jack Meyer, chairman of the university's support foundation, said it was tough convincing donors to stump up cash for the project.

The university has so far raised only about US\$25 million of the US\$400 million needed, most of it from the Bill and Melinda Gates and Goldman Sachs foundations. It will need to raise another US\$50 million by the end of the year to develop.

"If you try to get somebody in the US to understand the complexity of the problems and give a lot of money to a boarding school in Bangladesh, they'll say, 'excuse me, where is Chittagong again?' It's hard," said Mr Meyer, 62, a former president of the Harvard Management Company who helped boost Harvard University's management fund from US\$4 billion to US\$25 billion.

"This is a tough place to get things done efficiently and it's a very complicated project."

Mr Meyer said empowering women's "big thoughts and vision" was his "best hope for solving the world's interlocking problems".

"If you're looking for the silver bullet for all the world's problems, it's women's education in the developing world."

As well as donating land for the

If you're looking for the silver bullet ... it's women's education

Jack Meyer, support foundation chairman



campus, Bangladesh's government has also promised the university institutional autonomy and academic freedom.

Mr Ahmad said this was very important when setting up a world-class institution because political parties often tried to manipulate student groups and faculty appointments at universities in Bangladesh. Many of them had lost their best staff and four-year degrees could take up to seven years to complete as a result.

The university offers women an 18-month foundation programme called Access Academy, designed to boost skills in English, computers and advanced maths ahead of a five-year degree starting in September next year.

The liberal arts curriculum will combine three years of undergraduate studies in natural sciences, humanities and social

sciences with a two-year graduate degree focusing on professional areas such as information technology, business and engineering, with an internship programme built in.

Once it is operating at full capacity, the university will have roughly 3,000 students and turn out about 500 graduates yearly. Half will be on full scholarships and half will pay fees of US\$10,000 a year.

University vice-chancellor Nancy Dye, a former president of Oberlin College – a top liberal arts university in the US – was appointed in February. Vice-president for academic planning, Khoo Hoon Eng, is former vice-medical dean of National University of Singapore.

They are looking to hire three deans and about 27 academics across Asia and other English-speaking countries.

Dr Khoo said the liberal arts curriculum would be important for students' breadth of knowledge.

"We really just want our students to become educated in the sense that they will learn to learn and keep up with the knowledge in their field." Areas of study would encompass regional problems such as water pollution, electricity supply and environmental sustainability.

Professor Dye said although many Asian countries shared common problems, their understanding of each other was often very limited. The aim was to equip students to share and care.

"Flooding in Bangladesh is not just about Bangladesh. All that water comes down from Himalayan states in India, and yet there doesn't seem to be much co-operation between the nations to say, 'how can we work together?'"

View: <http://asian-university.org>

Activist drops out as duty calls

A Myanmar refugee who had been accepted to study at the Asian University for Women has dropped out because she is too busy campaigning against sexual violence in her country.

Cheery Zahau, 26, a co-ordinator with the Chin Women's Organisation who now lives in Mizoram, India, said Chin women had been systematically raped by Myanmar soldiers over the past five years. She felt the situation was too serious for her to take time out to study this year.

Ms Zahau is a high-profile activist who often addresses international human rights conferences about the plight of Chin women.

"Even though she recognised that



Cheery Zahau, Myanmar activist

further education would be important towards her long-term ability to support her community, her existing commitments have grown so much that she just can't stay in Chittagong for

long," said Kamal Ahmad, president and chief executive of the university's support foundation. "Fortunately, she left with a commitment to come back next year with 12 compatriots that she will recruit for us."

Speaking at the university before she left the course, Ms Zahau said she left Myanmar to live in India in 1999 because education opportunities were poor and controlled by the military.

"I have always wanted to go to university but my involvement with the women's democratic movement has occupied all of my time. Also, I didn't have the money to go."

Mimi Lau

Enthusiasm, energy and drive for change

Just a few of the life stories of the Asian University for Women's first intake of students:



Saiqa Rani, 25, Gujranwala, Pakistan: She says her parents are very conservative but that she has been fighting for more independence by joining an NGO for youth rights since she was 15: "My biggest strengths are my ambitions, confidence and vision to establish a new NGO to fight for gender equality."



Nazneen Hussainkutz, 21, Altit, Hunza, Pakistan: Nazneen's family lives in a remote, hilly village accessed only by difficult pathways: "I want to become a civil engineer one day to build a proper highway for my hometown to improve the economy."



Papia Tanchangya, 19, Rangamati, Bangladesh: Papia is from a Bangladeshi tribe in a remote hilly area. She wants to start a fashion line to preserve her tribal culture and help other tribal girls take up careers: "Most tribal people are poor. I have to be ambitious and self-employed so I can help others."



Jibymol Mathew, 17, Kerala, India: Jibymol is the daughter of a driver but her big dream is to become an environmental engineer to help remedy India's water pollution: "We need to find more recycling methods so poor people can get clean water."



Neethu Vijayan, 17, Kerala, India: Neethu says chemistry is her favourite subject and she wants to become a scientist: "My mother's strong character and willpower to solve any problem as a wife and woman has inspired our family a lot."



Mahilini Kailaiyangirichelvam, 21, Jaffna, Sri Lanka: Mahilini's father died in a bomb blast before she was born amid ethnic conflict among Sinhalese and Tamils. War has forced her out of schools since she was 10: "I want to give my love to others, that's the meaning of life."



Dalkaduru Arachchige Ganga Avanthi Silva Gunarathne, 19, Kalutara, Sri Lanka: Dalkaduru says she is sick of war in her country and wants to play a leading role to represent the disadvantaged: "I don't want to see another ethnic conflict in the future."



Duth Kimsru, 20, Kompong Cham, Cambodia: Kimsru is the only daughter of a single mother who works as a farmer. She says children are being deprived of schooling in her rural area: "Instead of going to schools, the children pick up rubbish on the streets. It's so sad."



Res Phasy, 20, Battambang, Cambodia: Phasy says she used to walk 2km to school every day and was told by her neighbour that studying was not good for her because she would still have to look after her husband and babies: "But if I get married I'll make my husband share half of the housework."



Neeru Ghale, 21, Dharan city, Nepal: Neeru paid for college by teaching maths and science in a Nepali English-speaking school. She wants to become an environmental engineer: "It's a new area in Nepal and lots of NGOs are gradually dedicating themselves to it."

Mimi Lau

Q&A

I am a secondary school teacher of English and many of my first-year students have very poor reading skills. What can I do to help them develop?

Education consultant Florence Robertson replies:

To learn to read effectively, your students need to develop skills in phonics, word recognition, fluency, spelling and writing, and comprehension. Through the study of phonics, students learn the relationship between the sounds of spoken words and the letters of written words. This skill is essential. When students learn the sounds that letters make, they are able to sound out new words. As they progress, students will begin to blend letter sounds to make a

word and to recognise word families such as fat, cat, and sat. Your students will also begin to understand letter patterns in words as well as prefixes and suffixes.

You will need to help your students to understand that some words don't fit the phonics rules such as "the", "was" and "you". They will have to memorise these words. Your students must have experience in recognising the high-frequency words that are in our language. As they gain more experience, their word-recognition skills will improve.

To help your students to develop fluency, you will need to read to them regularly. They will learn from you the importance of reading with expression. As they acquire fluency, they will show you that they know when to pause at appropriate places when reading

aloud. When students are taught to spell and write words correctly, they learn to associate a sound with a letter. This process assists them in their reading progress. They show that they are progressing not only in their spelling and reading but also in their writing. Even if students don't know the correct spelling of a word, with experience in phonics they begin to spell words the way they sound. They show their development in reading and writing by their ability to write in proper sentences and use correct capitalisation and punctuation. They gradually learn how to write different types of compositions such as stories, reports and letters.

The study of phonics ultimately leads to a student learning more vocabulary and increasing one's understanding and

comprehension. It is not enough to know what a word sounds like. A student must know what a word means. As students increase their vocabulary, their comprehension increases. They are able to use new words correctly in speech and writing.

As their reading skills develop, they recall details from college. In addition, they become able to predict what might happen in a new story.



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Source: Synovate PAX Q1 to Q4 '05 report