

Up Close: Asian University for Women

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At a time when equalizing measures like affirmative action are being challenged, a women's university is uplifting the most neglected and defenseless populations in Bangladesh. Yet the Asian University for Women (AUW) faces additional challenges in providing excellent higher education. This essay discusses how AUW also confronts mounting pernicious state control of education by transforming state-university relationships, and how, despite resurfacing nationalism and parochialism, it advocates for regional collaboration in its student body. In a conflict-ridden world, it marshals political, financial, and diplomatic prowess to provide a liberating pathway to those marooned in conflict. While fostering equality through its undergraduate and graduate programs, AUW has raised an age-old question concerning a university's function in an unjust, violence-prone, and divided world. Its answer: the best institutions embrace disadvantaged members of society through education aimed at emancipating those under the yoke of oppression.

In the postcolonial era, virtually every newly independent country established local universities. They were symbolic of the countries' newfound sovereignty and reflective of their aspirations to be equal participants in the comity of nations. At the outset, the dominant institutional model in former British colonies was of the Oxbridge variety: residential universities that offered neoclassical education. These universities were expected to produce a cadre of native civil servants in the image of the former colonial civil services.¹ During this era, this model was further influenced by U.S. land grant universities of the nineteenth century, whose practical approach to education became the mainstay in fields such as agriculture and engineering.² An example of this influence is the historic establishment of the Indian Institutes of Technology. In 1950, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru drew on his education in physics to lead an international collaboration that created a network of engineering and technology institutions. Over time, they rose as powerhouses for practical technological education whose impact has extended well beyond India.³

In the early 1970s, however, the prevailing regard for universities in the region began to shift. The tumultuous student unrest that had become ubiquitous internationally by 1968 – surfacing in capital cities such as Mexico City, Paris, and Dhaka – revealed the power within universities to rally political protest against

the establishment that could threaten the edifice of the state.⁴ By consequence, universities became springboards in former British colonies for social, political, and even revolutionary change. In Bangladesh, the movement for independence found its center on the campuses of institutions like Dhaka University.⁵ After the country's successful struggle to gain independence from Pakistan in 1971, many Bangladeshi universities awakened to a new sense of power that forced changes in their relationship with the state. Universities became increasingly autonomous and less accountable to the government while continuing to receive state funding. Due to these conflicting dynamics, governments also came to view universities less as engines for progress and more as political hydras that had to be dominated and controlled from within to maintain the balance of national power.

In the wake of this political unrest, universities began shadowing national politics with the same competitive framework of winners and losers. Academic excellence, scientific inquiry, and international competition became subject to government interference, which not only led to politically motivated appointments of leadership and faculty, but also perniciously impacted fair admission of students. This distortion continued even on campus where, for example, student union elections became a ticket to lucrative government contracts and political patronage.⁶ With extensive state subsidies to support enrolled students completing programs, and mass unemployment in the labor market, admission to residential universities also became a coveted economic gain.⁷ This benefit was made even more attractive due to the seemingly endless and elastic study period that came from repeated delays of final exams. With these advantages and loopholes at play, individual benefits began rivaling the importance of higher education's more constructive aims. Despite these adverse impacts, many students turned *coupists* emerged from the political tumult as formidable forces to reckon with for regional government and university administrations. In the wake of such challenges, it was no surprise that the best administrative talent began fleeing or otherwise withdrew from their posts at universities, sparking and further reinforcing the downward spiral of these institutions.⁸

The private-sector response to this power struggle was an attempt to capture the unmet educational demands of students who could not or would not enroll at public universities and who did not have the means to obtain an education in the West. Today, this response continues with low barriers to entry and market-driven tuition prices, measures that have helped private universities grow rapidly in Bangladesh (and elsewhere in South Asia), both in numbers and in the sizes of populations served.⁹ Yet despite this growth, they face key challenges, such as their inability to attract qualified full-time faculty. To manage this issue, many private universities have turned to hiring faculty who have primary appointments at public universities. These instructors travel from one campus to

another to hold classes, often in the subjects of information technology, business management, pharmacology, and accounting – coveted disciplines that hold good prospects for students seeking immediate employment after graduation.

Between the deterioration of public universities, the emergence of private universities catering to a narrow stream of vocational subjects, and the development of an even narrower socioeconomic band of students, a few things have been lost. For instance, education in the liberal arts and sciences is easily forsaken, since it may appear to be unprofitable or unaffordable from a business perspective. In terms of profitability, liberal arts graduates may not be able to qualify for lucrative technical jobs. As for affordability, private universities are dependent on tuition revenues, and may not have the capital to support research or build resources like scientific laboratories. In addition, the notion of demonstrated talent and merit opening doors to socioeconomic advancement has also become devalued by the money and political connections that supersede the advantages of merit alone.

It was in this context that the Asian University for Women (AUW) was conceived in the early 2000s.¹⁰ Following its establishment as an independent international university in 2008, it has worked to nurture a spirit of comprehensive inquiry in its students through undergraduate programs in the liberal arts and sciences, and graduate programs in professional fields. The entire undergraduate program is designed to spur curiosity, imagination, and experience with different modes of analysis, while the master's programs are a bridge to the world of livelihood. For instance, one new interdisciplinary major for undergraduate studies, supported by the Mellon Foundation, combines the humanities with history, religion, philosophy, and literature.¹¹ The master's programs, on the other hand, are all geared toward employment. The MA in education, MA in apparel and retail management, and MA in drug sciences and bioinformatics are a few examples of this.

To overcome pervasive discrimination on the basis of gender, class, and caste, the university's founders positioned AUW as a sanctuary and springboard for projects that advance knowledge and justice. A charter enacted by the Parliament of Bangladesh protects the university from outside influence and engages the state as an enabler of AUW's ambitions, which include the betterment of neglected populations.¹² To support this goal, philanthropists paid to open its doors to those who are socially and economically marginalized. As a result, 85 percent of its students are on full or partial scholarships.¹³ Another strategic approach is the university's decision to recruit faculty from around the world, which made it less constrained by the local academic ecology. An additional solution to local constraints has been the international scope codified in AUW's charter that requires only 25 percent of enrolled students to be from the host country of Bangladesh. This assertive move shows how the genius of a university lies in universality and meritocracy free from nationalism. Because of these specific approaches, AUW has become a magnet for

students from twenty-two countries, and a gateway for them to enter prestigious graduate programs and professions. Richard Saller, who became the twelfth president of Stanford University on September 1, 2023, captured the empowering essence of A UW and its students in his inaugural address during Stanford's convocation ceremony in 2023:

The lesson from [A UW students'] stories is the critical importance of their personal motivation in the pursuit of their own meaningful goals. The Asian University for Women instilled in them confidence in their own agency, and Stanford provided the resources to use their extraordinary talents in pursuit of their passions.¹⁴

By focusing on the education of women, A UW powerfully signals how imperative it is to cultivate the minds of a population that has been relegated to the periphery of history for too long. At a time when values of meritocracy, secularism, fairness, and equal opportunity are receding in the face of a pernicious system – one that sustains corruption, patronage, and hate-mongering (with its attendant violence) – A UW hopes to champion the restoration of humanity's essential values. Universities cannot be bystanders in this pursuit. They must be engaged participants in reshaping the world for the better by taking action in their chosen domains and setting the agenda for research and advocacy.

The words *Let no one ignorant of geometry enter* were allegedly inscribed on the door of The Academy, a school founded by the ancient Greek philosopher Plato that grew out of a renowned institution in Athens. Though it takes part in this academic tradition, A UW has no such motto or desire to keep certain students excluded. Instead, it looks to welcome those who evince courage, outrage at injustice, and profound empathy. In our current political climate, in which equalizing measures like affirmative action are being challenged, A UW explores the most unsuspected settings for gifted women and invites them to consider enrolling as students. The university also positions itself as an educational pathway for adolescent girls who, in many parts of Asia, are rarely told that they have any value beyond marriage and childbearing. The idea that they are free to imagine and pursue their dreams often seems farfetched given their circumstances: displacement, conflict, poverty, and so on. Such conditions leave girls and women vulnerable, so it is also imperative that the university earns the trust of families and the community in its recruitment efforts. A new school in a major city that demands no tuition or additional living expenses for some students could be suspected of dangers like human trafficking. Earning trust in this context is necessary, but once it is earned, it creates a new vision in those same communities that value girls and women in new ways.

A UW believes that Plato's "geometry" and other prerequisites for success in college can be taught and learned in supportive and nurturing environments.

This is why the university offers students flexibility and opportunity for academic preparation prior to matriculating into degree programs. Yet although these conditions are ideal for preparing prospective students, someone lacking purpose and motivation is unlikely to turn their education into an instrument that further empowers them to be an agent of change. It is for such reasons that A UW also employs a community approach that eschews online education, promotes receptivity, and encourages collaboration. For one, online education without adequate access to English-language content and instruction is not helpful for students who speak other languages. Second, A UW strives to bring communities together, even those at war, so that the experience of living and learning collectively leads to reconsideration of inherited prejudices – something difficult to achieve in virtual settings. Third, A UW encourages students to develop collaborative projects with their colleagues that aim to address problems across nations. It is only by bringing the university community together in person that this level of collaboration can take root.

To recruit its inaugural class in 2008, A UW sent outreach teams to Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka to meet with potential students, discuss institutional principles (such as courage, leadership, and tolerance), and administer country-specific entrance exams. With limited funds, there was no production or distribution of fancy brochures showing luxurious dorm rooms and athletic facilities. The recruitment teams focused instead on discussing the curriculum and quality of education. This was to be true college instruction that emphasized problem-solving and critical thinking, with no trace of the rote learning and memorization that remains common in schools across the region.¹⁵

After accumulating a list of 1,100 promising applicants from these visits, it was decided that 100 students would be a suitable number for A UW's first year and cohort. Not knowing how many women would say yes and leave their homes to study in Chittagong, the second-largest city in Bangladesh, 140 acceptance letters were sent out. In March 2008, the first class of A UW students arrived on campus, a group of 136 ambitious young women from six countries. Though delighted with the outcome, the university still faced many questions: Would these women, from distinct backgrounds, get along? Was the curriculum too ambitious? How would the university sustain quality faculty and administrators who worked in the admittedly difficult environment of Chittagong? Would the school be able to cater to everyone's needs in terms of health, nutrition, athletics, art, mental well-being, and so on?

Sixteen years later, nearly 1,600 students from twenty-two countries currently attend A UW, hailing from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Palestine, Sri Lanka, Syria,

Timor-Leste, Vietnam, and Yemen. In each setting, A UW has found novel ways to reach students. It has used existing microfinance networks to identify the most promising daughters of rural borrowers, campaigned in refugee camps where opportunities for higher education were not available, partnered with grassroots media to get the word out about the university's educational opportunities, and even used cellular communications in conflict zones to connect with potential students. Once these pupils are identified and express interest, they are then asked to submit an application that includes prior academic records, an admissions test, and a personal interview. Through these materials, a choice is made about their suitability for admission.

Having graduated only ten classes, it is still too early to tell how effective A UW's mission is to develop global leaders and agents of change. Yet some results have been promising. About 25 percent of graduating students enter master's and doctoral programs, with a significant number going to some of the top universities in the world. There is strong evidence of individual empowerment and entrepreneurship. For example, a group of graduates recruited from the floors of garment factories in Bangladesh have established a company that aims to create their own female-led factory. Afghan refugee alumni have taken steps to establish schools for other refugee girls in countries neighboring Afghanistan.¹⁶ Students who came from madrasas, educational institutions often associated with the religion of Islam, are signaling through their presence at A UW that a secular education does not necessarily violate any religious code.

Most important, A UW has quietly but effectively altered the image of a typical university student in Asian countries. It is no longer defined by middle-class appearances and values. Instead, it is exemplified by uniquely successful women from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, embodying the university's mission to counter systemic discrimination. A UW alumni have entered graduate programs at Oxford, Cambridge, Duke, Johns Hopkins, and other prominent global universities, and secured employment with leading multinational organizations.¹⁷ Their success signals that the education provided at A UW is to be taken seriously, even if the students come from backgrounds that are underestimated in traditional university settings. Whether they choose to continue their education, join a non-governmental organization, or enter roles in the private or public sectors, A UW graduates are motivated through shared goals to envision large-scale change; address pressing social, political, and economic issues; and promote gender equality in their home countries and around the world.

A UW's leaders are aware that nurturing such a visionary ethos places students and graduates in positions where they may be confronted with peril in the outside world. As a community, the university must be prepared to protect its members even after they have graduated. When 148 of its Afghan students and graduates

were stranded in Kabul just ahead of the NATO withdrawal of troops in 2021, A UW organized the evacuation of its entire community in Afghanistan.¹⁸ Since the return of the Taliban, another 500 Afghan students have been enrolled at A UW. More arrive each academic term, turning A UW into the single largest host of Afghan women students at any university. Similarly, with nearly 300 students from the Rohingya community, the university is arguably leading the way for the education of women belonging to this displaced ethnic group that has been escaping genocide in Myanmar since 2017.¹⁹

In a region where both public and private universities are heavily regulated, A UW is privileged to have a charter enacted by the Parliament of Bangladesh that gives it complete academic freedom and institutional independence. Unlike other academic institutions in the country, no government official vets A UW's curriculum, individual courses, or faculty appointments. The university's administration has promoted a framework for public-private collaboration in a constructive manner. Thus, the parliament enables rather than controls university affairs, as it did by providing the one hundred forty acres of land on which the permanent A UW campus is currently being built.²⁰ The government agency also took the extraordinary step of seeking to borrow funds from the World Bank to help support the campus construction. Nevertheless, as with most universities, A UW has faced its share of problems with faculty, infrastructure, funding, diversity and inclusion, and research. These pressing challenges are detailed below:

1. **Faculty:** The structure and content of A UW's curriculum is similar to offerings at liberal arts colleges in the United States. Consequently, the institution competes for the same caliber of instructors without having the financial resources to compensate them at commensurate levels. The mission of the university is probably the single most important magnet in attracting high-quality faculty from different parts of the world. Many of the challenges in recruiting and retaining staff seem to also be related to the location and struggles of adapting to life in Chittagong. For those who have never lived in this region, it can be a culture shock. Therefore, in order to reduce the turnover rate, particularly at senior levels, it is valuable that candidates visit A UW prior to accepting a position.
2. **Infrastructure:** Though the government of Bangladesh provided land for A UW's campus, when the university's charter was ratified in 2006 – and although the government has supplied additional grants of land as needed – the process to fund and start construction has been challenging and lengthy. Because the permanent campus is in development, the university must operate out of rented facilities for all academic, administrative, and residen-

tial needs. These temporary quarters have limited space for the growing student population and incur high maintenance costs. Chittagong's limited public services further increase the challenges of daily living for the academic community. The university's dependence on this fragile infrastructure will be significantly reduced once campus construction is completed, however. The initial master plan for the permanent campus, to accommodate three thousand students, was prepared by Moshe Safdie – a noted architect who also served as faculty at the Harvard Graduate School of Design.²¹ Safdie went on to design A UW's campus center, whose construction is nearing completion. With the projected expansion of student enrollment and introduction of additional extensive academic programs, A UW turned to Pritzker Prize-winning architect Renzo Piano to revise the master plan and design the next five major academic buildings and the performing arts center. Piano has described his vision for A UW as a “university in the middle of a forest,” committing to use a maximum of 10 percent of the campus land for built space.

3. **Funding:** The university has yet to identify a viable long-term model for sustainable funding. Thus, the challenge of providing superior education in a resource-limited setting to women who are generally without substantial financial means cannot be understated. Currently, 85 percent of students at A UW are on full or partial scholarships funded by government and foundation grants, corporate sponsors, and individual donors. Humanitarian contributions could also be useful, considering a philanthropic preference in the international development arena for supporting education in developing countries, but they have yet to help the university amass needed resources. With increased economic prosperity in the region, one can envision a financial model in which the tuition and fees paid by affluent students could subsidize costs for disadvantaged students. Nonetheless, A UW is far from achieving that model.
4. **Diversity and Inclusion:** These initiatives are key aspects of the school's design, instruction, and administration. However, while diversity is an explicit goal at A UW, it does present some problems. Not all students arriving at A UW are prepared to deal with a rigorous college curriculum. As a result, the university has had to develop several preliminary programs to prepare students for college-level studies; these preparatory programs are now a necessity in the university's academic structure.²² A UW has also developed robust mental health services – including one-on-one counseling, support groups, art therapy, martial arts training, and mentoring – to nurture the health and welfare of a diverse group of students, many with

traumatic backgrounds. In addition to these services, it has built dedicated spaces for vulnerable groups, such as the Rohingya Solidarity Center, to ensure that those in the university community who have endured the greatest setbacks receive the most support.

5. **Research:** At an institution where most faculty members carry a heavy burden of teaching, generating research has been challenging. And although the university's immediate surroundings provide ample opportunities for studies in public health, environmental sciences, or refugee and migration issues, faculty participation in research within these areas is still forthcoming. However, research productivity is expected to rise as A UW establishes more graduate programs.

Most universities in the developing world are either state sponsored (public sector) or supported through tuition revenues (private sector). In the rare cases in which an independent university develops without state funding, it is privileged to have a single philanthropic sponsor whose name the institution generally bears. (For example, Aga Khan University in Karachi, Pakistan, which was named after its founder Prince Aga Khan IV.) The Asian University for Women was created with an unusual mix of public and private characteristics. It is independent of the state. It does not have an overarching sponsor, and is thus sustained by a wider array of supporters. It is international in its reach and resulting composition of students and faculty. Its principal focus is to educate women who do not have access to resources or opportunities for higher education. And, as a liberal arts college, it eschews lecture-style classes in favor of close student-faculty interaction, making its teaching method more faculty-intensive.

If A UW succeeds in its vision, it will signal new possibilities for expanding the framework of higher education in the region. It will show how the state's role in this level of education need not be defined as one of authoritative control, but instead as one that enables the ultimate mission of a university education to be realized. A UW's focus on educating first-generation college students, and others whose social mobility is impeded by disadvantages, shows that affirmative action is far from an anachronistic practice. Rather, it is a social venture that must broadly inform our best institutions, because any system that excludes large portions of its population from higher education and socioeconomic advancement imperils the fabric of society by sustaining unethical and illegitimate conditions.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kamal Ahmad is the Founder of the Asian University for Women. Since 1988, he has served in leadership capacities at international institutions such as the World Bank, the Rockefeller Foundation, and UNICEF. In 1998, he conceived and codirected the World Bank/UNESCO Task Force on Higher Education & Society. He has received numerous awards for his contributions to international education and development from organizations such as the United Nations and the World Economic Forum.

ENDNOTES

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- ⁵ Samantha Christiansen, "From Student Activists to *Muktibahini*: Students, Mass Violence and the Bangladesh Liberation War," in *Genocide and Mass Violence in Asia: An Introductory Reader, Genocide and Mass Violence in the Age of Extremes*, Vol. 1, ed. Frank Jacob (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 78–97.
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- ⁸ One example of such withdrawals of administrative talent is an anecdotal account I received from a former vice chancellor of the University of Lucknow in India, who refused to yield to student demand to classify astrology as a science at the institution. Following this refusal, her home was surrounded by protesting students for days, with

- no state intervention. Not surprisingly, the eminent philosopher resigned rather than suffer the disgrace of intellectual assault.
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- ²⁰ “A Dream Deferred for a Decade but No More . . . AUW to Launch Campus Center Construction,” The Asian University for Women, May 18, 2022, <https://asian-university.org/2022/05/18/a-dream-deferred-for-a-decade-but-no-moreauw-to-launch-campus-center-construction>.
- ²¹ See this volume’s inside front cover for a photo of Safdie’s initial master plan.
- ²² “Pre-Undergraduate Programs,” The Asian University for Women, <https://asian-university.org/academic-programs/pre-undergraduate-programs> (accessed on March 26, 2024).