

Breaking Barriers

An OSUN Case Study

Executive Summary

In a developing country, like Bangladesh, students with disabilities encounter various challenges when pursuing higher education. Are accessible features and facilities in place to support students with physical disabilities and provide a more inclusive educational experience? Are current laws and proposed initiatives for inclusive education effectively enabling students with disabilities to participate in mainstream higher education? Is there hope for a future in Bangladesh where students with disabilities are not hindered by systemic barriers? These questions are explored in an audiovisual case study by the Open Society University Network (OSUN).

This case study is based on the documentary *Breaking Barriers* which was directed and produced by the students at BRAC University in Bangladesh. The documentary highlights the experiences of Rahim Bhuiyan, a university student with a disability, as he shares his journey of overcoming obstacles as a dedicated learner. The case proceeds to navigate what challenges students with disabilities face and fight to overcome the barriers to pursuing higher education by comparing the reality of accessible and inclusive education in Bangladesh.

The case study delves into the interviews conducted with two experts, Sabrina Sultana and Fahmida Rahman, on disability and inclusion in Bangladesh, as well as with digital accessibility expert Vashkar Bhattacharjee. It explores the present state of inclusive education in Bangladesh, the obstacles to inclusive education for all, and strategies for implementing solutions to enhance the higher education experience for students with disabilities.

The case includes the following elements:

- Video Interviews
- Interviews from experts
- Written Case Study: This Document

Introduction

The People's Republic of Bangladesh is a small country located on the Bay of Bengal in South Asia. It is densely populated, with a population of over 174 million.¹ Based on the most recent data, it is observed that while 40.29% of students with disabilities are currently enrolled in

¹Worldometer. 2023. "Bangladesh Population (2019) - Worldometers." *Worldometers.info*. July 16, 2023. <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/bangladesh-population/>.

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various levels of education, only 2.72% of these students have successfully completed or are currently enrolled in postsecondary education.² Parents in Bangladesh tend to hide the disability conditions of their children due to societal implications and a lack of awareness. Despite different existing policies in place for students with disabilities, only a limited number of people with special needs move up to higher education levels. The large portion of dropped-out students with disabilities is the result of the constant challenges and struggles that they and their guardians face at every step as they rise to higher education levels.³ Some of the leading causes of the decline in the number of students in higher education institutions are inadequate funding, inaccessible resources, limitations in infrastructure, and existing ineffective systems.

The student produced film *Breaking Barriers* documents the struggles of students with disabilities in Bangladesh. Despite the existence of numerous conventions aimed at promoting inclusive education for all students, the current situation for students with disabilities remains challenging. The film focuses on navigating root causes and interviews inclusion experts on what should be done to create a sustainable inclusive education system for students with disabilities.

History

After the birth of Bangladesh in 1972, the constitution was developed with a strong commitment to human equality and zero tolerance for discrimination. In 2007, the country ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, prioritizing inclusive education.⁴ To implement different policies for inclusive education, Bangladesh developed a National Strategic Plan in 2010 for higher education for the upcoming years.⁵ The plan outlined the significant challenges currently facing the education sector in Bangladesh. Some key areas of focus included enhancing the quality of higher education, increasing literacy rates, improving the management of educational institutions, and more. However, it is important to note that the plan does not address specific steps to support students with disabilities through educational policies. While ramps have been installed in many government institutions, there is a need for better maintenance and improved accessibility through proper connecting roads. Additionally, there is a lack of distributed accessible study materials, such as braille books, audio resources, large print materials, and digital texts, particularly in remote areas.⁶ Children with disabilities have faced

² “Majority of Children with Disabilities Are Not Enrolled in Any Formal Education: Survey.” 2023. *The Business Standard*. January 24, 2023. <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/majority-children-disabilities-are-not-enrolled-any-formal-education-survey-573142>.

³ Mamun, Harun Ar-Rashid, Md Mashiur Rahman, Mohammad Al-Amin, Md Moin Uddin Erfan, Saydur Rahman, and Rokeya Akter. 2024. “Complications Faced by Disabled Students at Higher Education Institutions in Bangladesh: Observations from Nondisabled Students.” *Open Journal of Social Sciences* 12 (4): 413–39. <https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2024.124029>.

⁴ Mahbub, Sakib. 2022. “On the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.” *The Daily Star*. September 2, 2022. <https://www.thedailystar.net/law-our-rights/news/the-rights-persons-disabilities-3109226>.

⁵ “Inclusive Bangladesh.” n.d. Accessed June 19, 2024. https://cdd.org.bd/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/CDD-Strategic-Plan_2012-to-2015.pdf.

⁶ J.Thompson, Stephen . 2020. “Situational Analysis for Bangladesh.” *Disability Inclusive Development*, June. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343306518_Disability_Inclusive_Development_Situational_Analysis_for_Bangladesh.

significant challenges in accessing digital platforms and other necessary facilities.⁷ So, with the absence of infrastructure and accessible facilities for students with disabilities, higher education institutions are not accommodating students with disabilities accordingly.

According to the 2013 Persons with Disability Rights and Protection Act, “‘Disability’ is defined as the long-term or permanent physical, psychological, intellectual, developmental, or sensory impairment of a person and the interaction of the perceptual and environmental barriers that hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.”⁸ The act defines 12 different kinds of disabilities that are acknowledged based on research and surveys worldwide. These are physical disability, mental illness leading to disability, visual disability, speech disability, cerebral palsy, Downs syndrome, hearing disability, deaf-blindness, autism or autism spectrum disorders, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, and other disabilities. The Act stresses that physically challenged persons should not face any obstacles to receiving education and mandates that educational institutions develop a supportive environment with accessibility.⁹ Despite the laws in place, students with disabilities face infinite challenges as they are not accommodated up to their needs.

Challenges of Persons with Disabilities in Bangladesh

Rahim Bhuiyan, who studies at a private university, is the main character for the case study. By observing his daily struggles, such as using his wheelchair to make it to classes and whether he has access to much-needed accessibility features on campus, the documentary shows the audience through the lens of a student with a disability. The case study documentary extensively researched the prevalent issues that seem to be intertwined with the issues of funding, awareness, and involvement of people with disabilities in the solution to figure out how to build an inclusive higher education system in Bangladesh.

In the late 1990s, persons with physical disabilities (PWDs) students went on a hunger strike in Chittagong University (one of the top public universities in the country) and demanded to open doors for students with disabilities in the universities.¹⁰ Before that, even though the Bangladesh constitution included inclusive education for students with disabilities, the government only worked on the primary and secondary institutions to provide access to students with disabilities. Different quotas for students with physical disabilities were added within the higher education system as the years went by. However, the inclusion of supportive facilities and staff is missing in almost all higher education institutions. During the interviews for the documentary, Fahmida

⁷ “Opportunities and Challenges to Inclusive Education for Children with Disabilities in Bangladesh.” 2023. *The Daily Star*. July 18, 2023. <https://www.thedailystar.net/roundtables/news/opportunities-and-challenges-inclusive-education-children-disabilities-bangladesh-3371986>.

⁸ “Bangladesh Sample Vital Statistics 2022.” 2023. *Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics*. https://bbs.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/bbs.portal.gov.bd/page/b343a8b4_956b_45ca_872f_4cf9b2f1a6e0/2024-02-12-09-14-e96115a9e06fa25854d494fc9ffbd52.pdf.

⁹ BRAC, *Study on the Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act 2013, Adaptation, Application and Recommendation*, BRAC Bangladesh, 2018, www.brac.net/program/wp-content/uploads/reports/Final%20Report_CPJ_ASC_Disability%205th%20August%202018.pdf.

¹⁰ Haque, A. (2023, February 28). A Shot in the dark: the State of Higher Education for Persons with Disabilities. *The Business Standard*. <https://www.tbsnews.net/features/panorama/shot-dark-state-higher-education-persons-disabilities-591778>

Rahman, a senior lecturer and program coordinator at BRAC University, identified a significant need for trained professionals in educational institutions to support students with disabilities. Ms. Rahman is currently working on a research proposal with the Open Society University Network called *Strengthening Guide*, aimed at providing students with disabilities access to the liberal arts education model. She highlighted the challenges in ensuring accessibility to higher education, noting that management committees are often unprepared to fully support students with disabilities. Both private and public universities in Bangladesh do not have the adequate equipment and finance required to help disabled students complete their higher education.¹¹ A non-profit organization named ‘Save the Children’ has developed practical examples and guidelines for students with disabilities to bridge the gap between teachers and students.¹² However, in terms of higher education, there is a lack of emphasis on developing guidelines or training programs that address and accommodate students with disabilities.

In Bangladesh, the infrastructure and lack of accessible resources limit the students, as the students enrolled in universities cannot pursue their higher studies in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math). There is a lack of adequate hygiene (toilets), appropriate furniture, assistive devices (braille and hearing aids), and appropriate educational materials for students with disabilities.¹³ Special teaching equipment is not available in universities.¹⁴ Students with disabilities can only avail themselves of limited choices in choosing their major. Due to a lack of options, students with disabilities can only pursue their majors in the humanities. Dr. Tariq Ahsan, a professor of the Institute of Education and Research at the University of Dhaka, explains that only about 1% of the special needs population can access higher education due to the concept of inclusion not being mainstreamed here.¹⁵

Besides the prevalent inclusivity issue, other underlying causes of the lack of an inclusive education system are the social and cultural situation in Bangladesh towards people with disabilities. The stigma against the people with disabilities and their families prevails all around the country, especially in rural areas. Different kinds of disabilities are perceived to be a burden to the individual and their families. They are subjected to bullying, disparaging remarks, and a sense of insecurity caused by superstitious reasons and adverse social treatments.¹⁶ So, the children with disabilities lose their motivation and become less enthusiastic about becoming self-reliant. In order to ensure that students with disabilities participate and enthusiastically pursue inclusive education, inclusive education programs for children with disabilities have to be

¹¹ Interview with Fahmida Rahman.

¹² “Opportunities and Challenges to Inclusive Education for Children with Disabilities in Bangladesh.” 2023. *The Daily Star*. July 18, 2023. <https://www.thedailystar.net/roundtables/news/opportunities-and-challenges-inclusive-education-children-disabilities-bangladesh-3371986>.

¹³ Interview with Fahmida Rahman.

¹⁴ “Situation Analysis on Children with Disabilities in Bangladesh 2014.” 2014. www.unicef.org. June 2014. <https://www.unicef.org/bangladesh/en/reports/situation-analysis-children-disabilities-bangladesh-2014>.

¹⁵ Haque, Ashraful . 2023b. “A Shot in the Dark: The State of Higher Education for Persons with Disabilities.” *The Business Standard*. February 28, 2023. <https://www.tbsnews.net/features/panorama/shot-dark-state-higher-education-persons-disabilities-591778>

¹⁶ Islam, Md Karimul , Nabila Tahsin , and Dipika Biswas. 2023. “When Social Attitudes towards Disabled People Make Their Lives Worse.” *The Business Standard*. April 5, 2023. <https://www.tbsnews.net/thoughts/when-social-attitudes-towards-disabled-people-make-their-lives-worse-611530>.

designed and executed in efficient ways that recognize and address the distinct geographical, cultural, and linguistic diversity present in various regions across Bangladesh.

Challenges from the Government

One of the most complex issues that is halting the success of government policies and mandates for people with disabilities is the issue of the management committee. In order to navigate the core causes of the lack of infrastructure and implementation of the mandates, the documentary researched different proactive organizations and programs that are working for persons with disabilities. Sabrina Sultana, Founder President at Bangladesh Society for the Change and Advocacy Nexus (B-scan), explains that despite different policies and laws passed for people with disabilities, the significant issue hindering execution is that different ministries deal with education and welfare activities for persons with disabilities. The education system specified for students with disabilities is under the Ministry of Social Welfare, but the general education system falls under the Ministry of Education. Furthermore, NCTB (National Curriculum and Textbook Board), the board that makes and distributes educational resources (like textbooks, illustrated teacher's guides, and other educational facilities), works under the Ministry of Education. The schools for students with disabilities are under the Ministry of Social Welfare. As a result, the two ministries have a coordination issue.

The incoherence in management committees is an obstacle to executing successful initiatives for students with disabilities. This further divides the private and public universities in Bangladesh, which lack the required mandates for accommodating the required facilities for the students with disabilities. Sultana discusses that she and her team have reached out to the government to identify the core reason for the lack of holistic education for students with disabilities, and there have been several legal notices sent to make sure this issue between the ministries is resolved.¹⁷ So that the Ministry of Education handles both general and special education within a single ministry and is able to efficiently work towards inclusive education for all.

Current Developments for Ensuring Inclusivity

B-scan is a non-profit organization that has been working for people with disabilities since 2009.¹⁸ It is a voluntary organization that works to advocate for different rights for people with disabilities, like the right to education. It started with the initiative of Sabrina Sultana, a Muscular Dystrophy survivor, and an activist in 2009 with an online group on Facebook. The initiative quickly gathered momentum, and many joined hands from civil society, professionals, development advocates, therapists, members of families with persons with disabilities, etc. Sultana shared different successful and ongoing projects that are focused on ensuring inclusive education for students with disabilities.

She is the founder of Krishti, an organization dedicated to conducting research and providing services for individuals with visual impairments. Through collaborative efforts with various government institutions, including the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Housing, her

¹⁷ Sabrina Sultana in discussion with Umma Maimuna Alam.

¹⁸ "Bangladesh Society for the Change and Advocacy Nexus (B-SCAN) | LinkedIn." 2024. *LinkedIn.com*. 2024. <https://bd.linkedin.com/company/b-scan#:~:text=About%20us->.

initiatives aim to enhance accessibility for individuals with disabilities. With over 13 years of expertise in advocating for and supporting individuals with disabilities, she places a strong emphasis on accommodating employees with diverse disabilities, viewing it as a means to set a positive example for organizations nationwide. By addressing challenges and implementing solutions, she strives to ensure that students with disabilities receive the highest quality education possible.

Accessibility for Students with Disabilities

Vashkar Bhattacharjee, who is the National Consultant in developing web accessibility with the Agency to Innovate (A2i) program in the Office of the Prime Minister, shared his experience and expert opinion on the case study. He fought for his right to education in 1997. When he was studying as an undergraduate, he went on a hunger strike to voice out the challenges he was facing as a student with a visual impairment. Bhattacharjee studied history as his major because persons with disabilities do not have accessible educational resources to study STEM. Currently, Bhattacharjee, along with his team, is working on developing more holistic content with government organizations so that in the future, students can also have STEM subjects as their major.¹⁹

A2i program is a government-sponsored project that is aimed at inclusive education for all. Some of the notable activities executed by the program include the introduction of the disability quota system at the University of Chittagong, which created over 3,000 accessible educational resources and other materials for students with disabilities. One of the platforms created by the program is *MuktoPaath*, a self-directed digital learning platform where students with disabilities can offer more than 300 online courses with advanced accessibility features. So, students with visual impairment, night blindness, Down syndrome, and other disabilities can find accessible materials on a range of topics to study themselves. A2i also has initiatives where they distribute smartphones and other materials free of cost from the funding provided by the government to students with disabilities from underprivileged families.

Optimistic Future for Students with Disabilities

The documentary highlights some of the current initiatives that aim to address and work to ensure inclusive education for all. Bhattacharjee believes that Bangladesh has come a long way since the conventions were signed.²⁰ The initiative to produce and distribute Braille books has proven to be successful in expanding access to higher education in various regions of the country. Additionally, several non-profit and government organizations are implementing effective strategies to promote inclusive education. Sultana elaborates that in terms of the working solutions towards a more inclusive education system, accessibility, active participation, proper infrastructure, and acceptance have to be ensured so that students with disabilities can enjoy an educational environment and employability in Bangladesh.²¹

¹⁹ Vashkar Bhattacharjee interview with Umma Maimuna Alam.

²⁰ Vashkar Bhattacharjee interview with Umma Maimuna Alam.

²¹ Sabrina Sultana in discussion with Umma Maimuna Alam.

Perspective teachers with a flexible educational curriculum are needed to ensure that they are well-trained to handle students with disabilities at the university. The Government should ensure that proper funding distribution and support are provided to higher education institutions so they are well-equipped to accommodate students with disabilities. The policies existing in higher education should not be limited to just being a policy, implementation has to be done. By providing inclusive education and encouraging students with disabilities to achieve higher literacy rates, Bangladesh's economy will also boom with their involvement. Long-term plans have to be evaluated and executed to enable students with disabilities to overcome academic and accessibility challenges. By implementing strategies at the foundational level, experts are confident that Bangladesh's higher education institutions can establish an inclusive education system that enables students with disabilities to reach their maximum potential.