https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23301705



CARO Global Press | Systematic Review Paper | CARO-CES-2026-RP-0001

# Structural and Cultural Barriers to Youth Research Engagement in Bangladesh: A Systematic Literature Review

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## Abstract

This review asks why so few young people in Bangladesh take part in research, and what keeps them out. It draws on thirty-five peer-reviewed studies, government reports, and empirical analyses set in Bangladeshi higher education, following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework. The evidence falls under five themes: the landscape of youth research participation, structural and institutional barriers, cultural and motivational factors, the mentorship and peer-community deficit, and enabling pathways. The numbers are stark. Only 21.5% of undergraduates do any research beyond required coursework, 76.2% have never received mentorship or guidance on research, and in 2020 the country's universities spent just 2% of their academic budgets on it. Several forces deepen the problem. A neoliberal policy environment has turned universities into credential factories rather than places that generate knowledge. A digital divide shuts 67.5% of students out of reliable online access to research. Gendered exclusion holds female participation in STEM to roughly 14%. And an exam-driven, rote-learning culture suppresses participation well before students reach university. The review closes with an integrated conceptual framework and ten specific policy recommendations for Bangladesh, drawn from the full set of thirty-five studies.

**Keywords:** youth research engagement, structural barriers, cultural barriers, mentorship deficit, higher education Bangladesh, neoliberalism, digital divide, gender inequality, PRISMA

## 1. Introduction

On paper, the scene is one of triumph. Bangladesh's annual peer-reviewed output rose dramatically between 2017 and 2022, from 1,674 papers to 12,843 - a staggering 668% increase reflecting soaring research aspirations (Alom et al., 2026). The country's university sector expanded accordingly, going from fewer than 50 institutions to over 160 in the public and private sphere, educating millions of students (Chowdhury et al., 2021; Sawrov et al., 2018).

But these headline figures mask a far tougher reality. Only 21.5% of undergraduate students engage in activities that can be described as research beyond mandatory coursework (Yasmeen et al., 2025), and a stark 76.2% have never experienced any formal guidance or mentorship on the topic (Jubair et al., 2025). In 2021 alone, a total of 11 of the country's 50 public universities failed to publish a single article (UGC, 2022), and it lagged behind 120 of the 154 countries in the 2021 Global Knowledge Index, scoring the weakest in the ‘research, development and innovation’ category (UGC, 2022) – just 19.2 out of 100. More output hasn’t translated into a robust, inclusive research culture for young people.

This disconnect is not a simple issue of motivation. Indeed, numerous studies confirm that anywhere from 47 to 66% of Bangladeshi students express a genuine interest in research and see a future in a research career (Yasmeen et al., 2025; Ferdoush et al., 2021). Yet their aspirations largely fail to

materialize due to a pervasive combination of structural, institutional and cultural barriers that interlock with one another. Funding for research infrastructure remains critically low (Sarkar et al., 2013; Chowdhury et al., 2021; UGC, 2022). Neoliberal reforms unleashed a boom of privatization, expanding the number of institutions but downgrading research culture in their hierarchy of priorities (Kabir, 2013; Kabir & Chowdhury, 2021; Ahmed, 2022). A deeply entrenched culture of rote memorisation and exam performance, starting from school and continuing to higher education, teaches students to absorb information rather than generate it (Rahman et al., 2025; Hossain, 2025; Khan et al., 2023). Formal mentorship programmes are virtually non-existent (Naomee & Bayezid, 2016; Jubair et al., 2025; Habib et al., 2023), while classroom teaching itself is primarily teacher-centric and passive, leaving little room for active student participation (Hossain et al., 2026; Islam, A., 2021).

These fundamental obstacles are compounded by others that have received less attention. The digital divide renders access to online journals, databases, and research tools an unnecessary struggle for many students (Sultana et al., 2024; Badiuzzaman et al., 2021). Young women continue to be sidelined from research-active settings, by both social norms and unwelcoming academic environments, and the lack of visible female role models in science and academia makes a career less attainable (Tabassum, 2025; Kohtamki et al., 2024; Islam & Jirattikorn, 2024a, 2024b). Concentration of research resources in the capital, Dhaka, places students in provincial universities, including Sylhet, at a distinct disadvantage (Jannath, 2021; Islam, A., 2021). The breakdown of established peer networks through migration to urban centers and political instability also deprives students of the collective support essential for research participation (Tanjeela et al., 2025; Billah et al., 2023; Husain, 2026; Ali et al., 2021). The cumulative effect of these factors is a massive brain drain in 2021 alone, 45,000 young people left for universities abroad, with the poor research environment being explicitly cited as one reason (Sarker et al., 2024; Islam, M., 2023). The resulting gap in the knowledge economy makes for a struggling job market, where graduates increasingly lack the research skills that employers now demand (Ejaz et al., 2025).

Despite the overwhelming nature of these barriers, existing studies have focused on these issues in isolation. Individual papers may illuminate one problem, or another, but a holistic and Bangladesh-grounded body of evidence has yet to be built. This review aims to fill that void, synthesising thirty-five Bangladesh-context studies to produce the first systematic synthesis of the structural and cultural conditions currently stifling youth research participation. The review is guided by five objectives:

- To map out the present landscape of research participation in Bangladesh, including where this activity is concentrated and the size of the gap between aspirations and reality.
- To investigate the range of structural and institutional barriers-from a deficit of resources and failure in governance to the constraints imposed by neoliberal policy and digital inequity-which impede young researchers.
- To analyze the social and motivational factors influencing young people's perceptions of research, such as traditional rote-learning pedagogies, extrinsic motivation, passive instruction delivery and gendered constraints.

- To examine how a lack of both formal mentorship and peer support systems entangles structural and cultural barriers, thus creating a cycle of disengagement.
- To identify evidence-based solutions, including effective approaches and policy interventions, that can expand young people's engagement in research in Bangladesh, considering the country's specific challenges and opportunities.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 outlines the PRISMA-guided research methodology. Section 3 reports on the research findings under the five themed areas. Section 4 offers cross-cutting implications for research. Section 5 discusses limitations, identifies areas for future research, and provides policy recommendations.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1 Search Strategy

This systematic review adopted a process defined by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework (Moher et al., 2009). This internationally recognised set of criteria provides transparent and repeatable means to identify, screen, and synthesise the published literature. Social scientists and education researchers have increased their reliance upon PRISMA because each of the different phases of a review remains open to inspection (Haq et al., 2025).

Ten information sources were searched: Google Scholar, ResearchGate, BanglaJOL, JSTOR, ERIC, SpringerLink, SAGE Journals, PubMed Central, Taylor & Francis Online, and the medRxiv preprint server. This search of formalised databases was supplemented by manual reference-list scanning and targeted searching for authors in ResearchGate and Academia.edu. The searching took place between January and June 2026, concentrating on publications released from 2013–2026. I deliberately searched for two early policy analysis outputs from 2013 to have the neoliberal policy discourse and baseline that continues to underpin current barriers included: Kabir, 2013; Sarkar et al. (2013).

Nine keyword clusters generated the Boolean queries that structured the search, as follow: (i) research engagement/ participation/ barriers + Bangladesh + university; (ii) undergraduate research + Bangladesh + challenges; (iii) research culture + Bangladesh + students/faculty; (iv) mentorship/ supervision + Bangladesh + university students; (v) women/ gender + research + Bangladesh + higher education; (vi) digital divide + Bangladesh + undergraduate; (vii) higher education quality/ governance + Bangladesh; (viii) brain drain/ student migration + Bangladesh + research environment; and (ix) University Grants Commission Bangladesh + research funding.

Each of these searches were confined to a Bangladesh-focused literature to ensure the resultant synthesis spoke directly to Bangladeshi contexts rather than importing international literature assumed to be transferable.

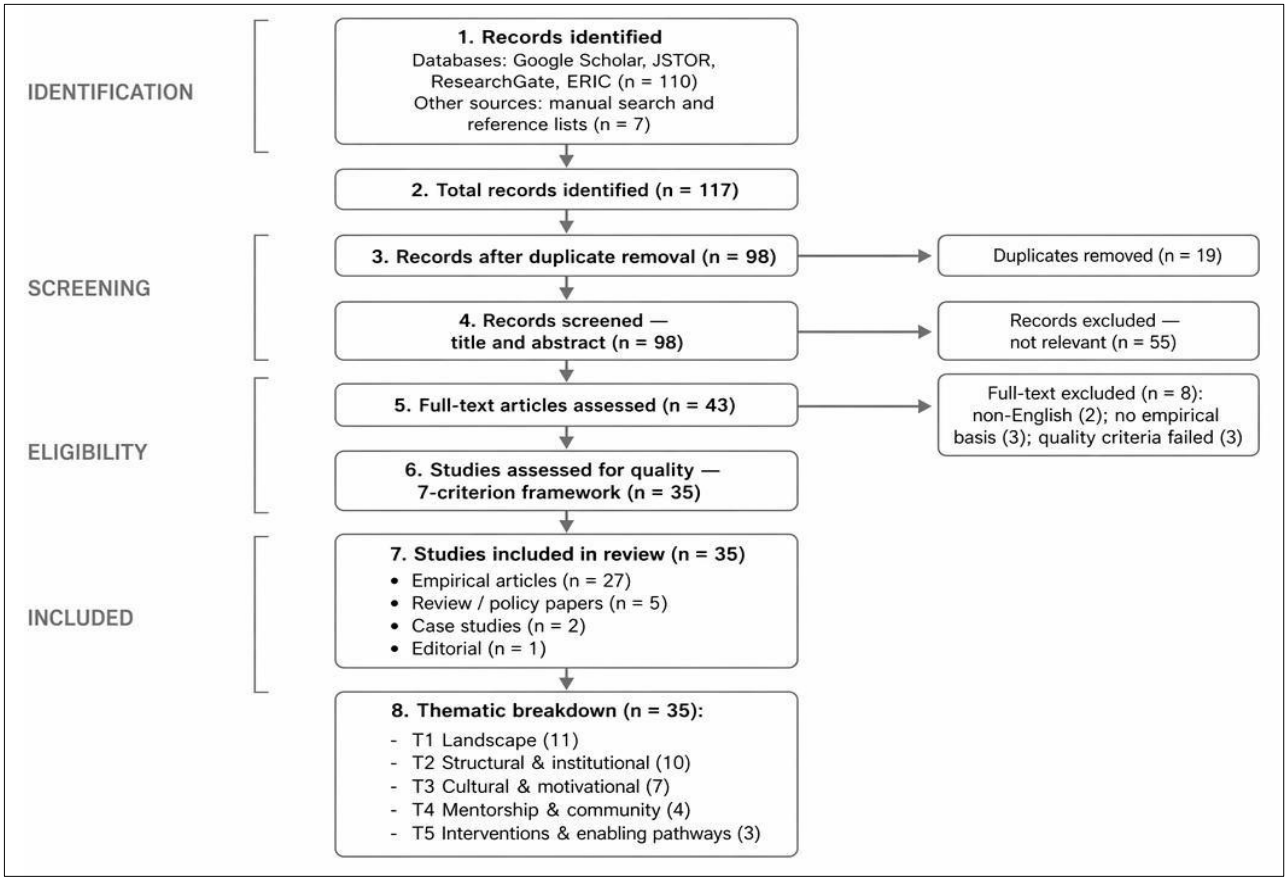
### 2.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies that satisfied the following conditions were included in the analysis: (i) The study focused

on higher education, research engagement, research culture, research barriers, mentorship, digital access, gender equality in academia, student well-being with implications for their engagement with academia, graduate employability or brain drain within the specific context of Bangladesh; (ii) the publication format was either a peer-reviewed article, a chapter in a book, an institutional report from a governmental organization, or an empirical data report from a pre-print archive; (iii) the date of publication fell within the period between 2013 and 2026 inclusive; and (iv) the language of the study was English. Studies with Bangladesh as a marginal point of comparison but no substantive, country-specific analysis, non-peer-reviewed grey literature, abstract-only conference contributions and opinion articles lacking an empirical basis were excluded. One government publication-the UGC Annual Report (2022)- was retained and utilized as a source of relevant primary national statistics which is not elsewhere available. Two pre-prints-Jubair and Mehenaz (2024) and Ferdoush et al. (2021)-were retained because they contain relevant Bangladesh-specific data which is not available in a published peer-reviewed article.

A total of 117 potentially relevant publications were identified from the initial searches, and after removing 19 duplicates 55 references were removed through screening titles and abstracts for relevance to the Bangladesh context and topic areas. Of the 43 full text documents evaluated eight were rejected – 2 for being non-English, 3 because they lacked empirical content and 3 due to not meeting the minimum quality standards. Therefore, a total of 35 papers were retained for the final analysis (Figure 1).

**Figure 1.** *PRISMA 2020 flow diagram for the systematic review (Moher et al., 2009).*



### *2.3 Quality Assessment*

The quality of included studies was assessed using a seven criterion framework derived from Haq et al. (2025) and aligned with standard systematic review procedure (Moher et al., 2009): (i) relevance to the Bangladesh HE context and to research participation/ barriers; (ii) appropriateness and quality of research design; (iii) clarity of data collection and analysis methods; (iv) appropriateness and applicability to the Bangladesh context; (v) consideration of reflexivity and potential researcher bias; (vi) coherence and consistency of the finding; and (vii) publication in a peer-reviewed or recognised institutional venue. The study must satisfy a minimum of five criteria to be retained. Table 1 summarizes data for each of the included studies.

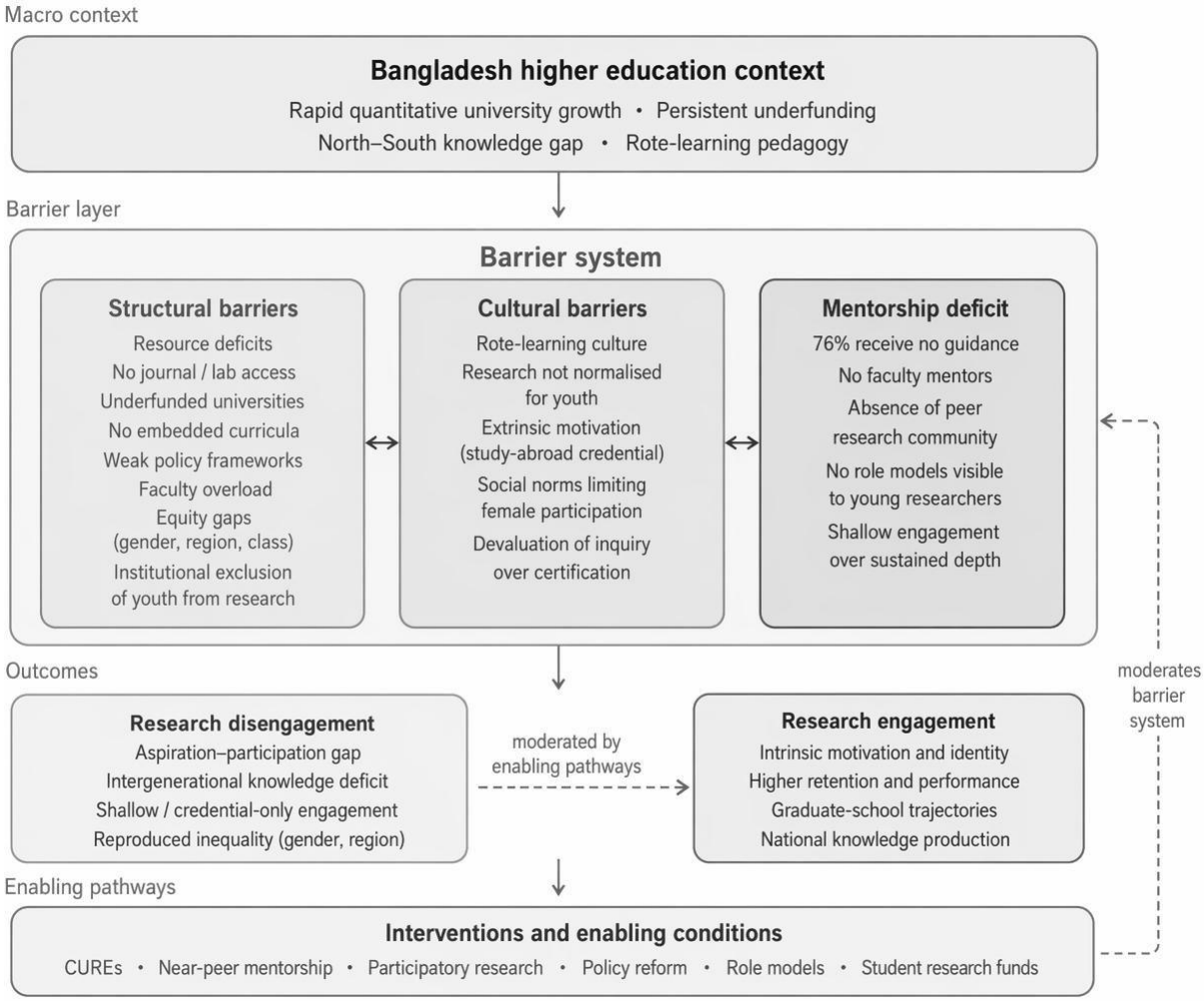
### 2.4 Data Extraction and Thematic Synthesis

The five-stage thematically synthesised protocol outlined by Thomas and Harden (2008) was used for analysis. Through iterative, open coding, categories were reduced to produce five themes:1) the landscape of youth research participation; 2) structural and institutional barriers; 3) cultural and motivational factors; 4) the mentorship and peer-community deficit; and 5) enabling pathways.

### 2.5 Conceptual Framework

This thematic synthesis provided the conceptual framework (Figure 2), identifying structural and cultural barriers causing youth disengagement with research in Bangladesh, and describing enabling intervention that counteract barriers. The framework contains four layers: macro context (Bangladesh neoliberal HE); barrier system (structural, cultural and mentorship-community nexus); outcomes (research engagement vs disengagement); and enabling pathways (interventions to offset barriers). This model is an adaptation of the Law & Lawsons' ecological contextual framework for student engagement (2013) and Heng et al.'s multilevel research engagement model in developing nations (2020).

**Figure 2.** *Conceptual framework: structural and cultural barriers to youth research engagement in Bangladesh.*




*Note. Bidirectional arrows between barrier columns denote mutual reinforcement. Dashed feedback arrow indicates the moderating role of enabling pathways (adapted from Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Heng et al., 2020).*

**Table 1.** *Details of the thirty-five studies included in this systematic review.*

| No. | Author(s) & Year | Study Area | Method | Key Findings re Barriers |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **1** | Jubair et al. (2025) | Bangladesh, national | Mixed | 76.2% lack mentorship; 75.8% lack research community; 68% unaware how to publish; 76.2% received no institutional support. |
| **2** | Hossain (2025) | Bangladesh, comparative | Mixed | Cultural taboos and structural gaps are primary obstacles; Bangladesh lags India, Japan, China, USA, UK in youth research enabling conditions. |
| **3** | Sawrov et al. (2018) | Bangladesh, national | Review | University expansion without research infrastructure; systemic weaknesses across public and private HEIs; quality lags quantity. |

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|---|---|---|---|---|
| 4 | Jubair & Mehenaz (2024) | Bangladesh, national | Mixed (preprint) | Resource scarcity, guidance gap, methodology deficit; aspiration-participation gap is structural not motivational. |
| 5 | Alom et al. (2026) | Bangladesh, national | Mixed | Publication growth 668% (2017–2022) but output concentrated in senior faculty; funding and infrastructure deficits persist. |
| 6 | Jubair & Islam (n.d.) | Bangladesh, national | Quantitative | Research motivation is predominantly extrinsic (study-abroad credential); role-model exposure significantly increases research aspiration. |
| 7 | Yasmeen et al. (2025) | Bangladesh, medical colleges (n=2,864) | Quantitative | Only 21.5% actively participate; 7% have formal training; mentorship gaps (16.3%) and funding (15.9%) are primary career barriers. |
| 8 | Ferdoush et al. (2021) | Bangladesh, medical colleges (n=1,279) | Quantitative (preprint) | Time pressure (89.1%), methodology deficit (87.5%), guidance deficit (86.6%); research methodology absent from medical curriculum. |
| 9 | Habib et al. (2023) | Bangladesh, 5 public universities incl. SUST | Quantitative | Governance failures and funding shortfalls are main faculty barriers; 60% of academics lack PhD/MPhil; overseas qualification predicts attitude. |
| 10 | Kohtamäki et al. (2024) | Bangladesh, China, Finland | Systematic review | Bangladesh gender-in-academia research is least developed (n=15 papers over 21 yrs); cultural refusal pattern tied to patriarchal norms. |
| 11 | Islam & Jirattikorn (2024a) | Bangladesh, national | Policy viewpoint | Women ~14% of STEM participants; 'not for women' societal norm is dominant barrier; role model scarcity perpetuates exclusion cycle. |
| 12 | Tabassum (2025) | Bangladesh, national | Review | 14% female STEM participation; multi-layered obstacles (societal, institutional, individual); enrollment-participation paradox documented. |
| 13 | Chakrabarty (2025) | Bangladesh, national | Qualitative review | Poor governance is the single greatest barrier; political interference, faculty incompetence, and corruption diverts resources from research. |
| 14 | Islam & Jirattikorn (2024b) | Bangladesh, engineering HEIs | Qualitative | Women navigate structural constraints through individual agency; mentoring communities essential but absent; multi-level barriers documented. |
| 15 | Naomee & Bayezid (2016) | Bangladesh, 5 universities, Dhaka | Qualitative | No formal mentoring system in Bangladesh HE; teachers and students unfamiliar with mentoring concept; structural absence confirmed. |
| 16 | Ali et al. (2021) | Bangladesh, urban dormitories | Mixed | Rural students face depression, anxiety, cultural barriers, financial stress; no institutional support; academic engagement suppressed. |
| 17 | Sarker et al. (2024) | Bangladesh, multi-institutional | Qualitative | Research environment named as explicit push factor for studying abroad; 45,000 students left in 2021; certificate education fails research. |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 18 | UGC Annual Report (2022) | Bangladesh, all universities | Gov. statistical report | 11 public universities produced zero publications; 2% budget on research; 60% academics lack PhD; GKI rank 120th among 154 nations. |
| 19 | Islam (2023) | Bangladesh, national | Review | Brain drain score 7.0/10 (World Bank 2021); insufficient research sector allocation explicitly named as primary brain drain driver. |
| 20 | Khan et al. (2023) | Bangladesh, Dhaka | Qualitative | Dissertation topic selection systematically inadequate; students lack guidance; supervisor-student conflicts compound barriers. |
| 21 | Sultana et al. (2024) | Bangladesh, national | Qualitative | ICT education failed to provide digital research skills; socioeconomic inequality drives divide; 44.7% cannot access online learning. |
| 22 | Chowdhury et al. (2021) | Bangladesh, national | Review (Springer) | <0.2% GDP to HE until 2017; research infrastructure barriers: equipment deficits, no technical support, organizational culture failure. |
| 23 | Jannath (2021) | Bangladesh, Sylhet incl. SUST | Qualitative | Sylhet-specific quality deficits at SUST; library/journal access critically limited; regional disadvantage vs. Dhaka institutions. |
| 24 | Badiuzzaman et al. (2021) | Bangladesh, national | Mixed | Only 32.5% of students access online learning seamlessly; three-tier digital divide: hardware, connectivity, and research-ready skills. |
| 25 | Sarkar et al. (2013) | Bangladesh, public universities | Quantitative | Research facilities among five critical insufficiency areas; budgetary provision is primary limiting factor; foundational structural baseline. |
| 26 | Kabir (2013) | Bangladesh, national | Policy analysis | Neoliberal HE policies since 1970s repositioned universities as credential producers; Private University Act 1992 prioritized market over research. |
| 27 | Ahmed (2022) | Bangladesh, national | Qualitative | COVID-19 policy response embedded six neoliberal features; individual responsibility burden placed on students; and deepened research access inequality. |
| 28 | Kabir & Chowdhury (2021) | Bangladesh, national | Policy analysis | Privatization drives by market logic; quality control is rhetoric vs. reality; geopolitics of knowledge; research culture deficits in private sector. |
| 29 | Tanjeela et al. (2025) | Bangladesh, Dhaka universities | Qualitative | COVID-19 disrupted social capital and peer networks; loss of campus community suppressed academic engagement; institutional support absent. |
| 30 | Billah et al. (2023) | Bangladesh, Dhaka (6 universities) | Qualitative | Financial constraints, resource shortages, and loss of confidence are primary challenges; peer networks are critical coping mechanism in absence of institutional support. |
| 31 | Hossain et al. (2026) | Bangladesh, national (n=417) | Quantitative | Interactive teaching ($\rho$=0.386) and teacher feedback ($\rho$=0.415) significantly predict student participation; passive pedagogy suppresses engagement. |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 32 | Ejaz et al. (2025) | Bangladesh, national | Mixed | Curricula misaligned with research and labor market demands; practical/research skills absent; socioeconomic barriers compound curriculum gaps. |
| 33 | Husain (2026) | Bangladesh, national (n=464) | Quantitative | Political instability (July 2024 Movement) directly disrupted academic and research engagement; institutional welfare systems inadequate. |
| 34 | Islam, A. (2021) | Bangladesh, Rabindra University (regional) | Quantitative | Motivation and peer influence predict academic engagement at regional universities; institutional factors are significant predictors; regional disadvantage confirmed. |
| 35 | **Rahman et al. (2025)** | **Bangladesh, national** | **Review** | Exam-centric culture produces chronic stress and social withdrawal; only 27% of rural schools have functioning libraries; rote-Learning is policy remediable. |

## 3. Results

Thematic review of thirty-five Bangladesh-context studies indicates that youth barriers to research engagement are a single self-reinforcing system. It was built via neoliberal policy reform, maintained by failures of governance, propelled by teaching to learn, and most acutely felt in a near total absence of mentoring and of a community for researchers. The five themes detailed below are presented separately for analysis, yet work as intertwined obstacles, and together they help to explain why youth research disengagement has become deep, pervasive, and lasting in all institution-types, regions, and demographic groups represented in the literature.

### 3.1 Landscape of Youth Research Participation in Bangladesh

#### 3.1.1 Participation rates and the aspiration-participation gap

The most prominent feature of Bangladesh's research landscape is a stubborn gap between aspirations and reality that appears systematically integrated in the system. The largest study in the country of the kind under discussion, an institutional survey of 2,864 undergraduates at three medical colleges by Yasmeen et al. (2025), finds less than one-fifth participate in any research beyond what is required, despite over 47% aspiring to research careers. The vast majority, some 93% of students, had no training in research methods and fewer than 7% of surveyed student researchers have been published in peer-reviewed literature. Ferdoush et al.'s (2021) larger study of over 1,279 medical students yielded the same finding: two-thirds wanted a career in research, yet an overwhelmingly large majority of that group – between 86-89% of students – cited lack of time, absence of methodology knowledge and inadequate support as deterrents to research engagement.

Jubair et al. (2025) highlight the gap as vividly as possible in the experience of 467 students in high school and university; 60% said getting started in research was a high obstacle, over three-quarters expressed no institutional support for research engagement, and around seven-tenths do not know how or where to publish their research. Similar findings are published as pre-prints by Jubair and Mehenaz (2024), which frame resource scarcity and a missing knowledge ecosystem as the dominant

organizational barriers. The critical takeaway is that students desire research opportunities; the structures they are in are inadequate to facilitate that desire. A study of a public regional university by Islam, A. (2021) further solidifies the structural nature of engagement disparities by demonstrating a strong correlation between institutional factors, including teaching quality, availability of faculty and resources, and student performance in research engagement.

### 3.1.2 The growth-without-inclusion paradox

Although the aggregate volume of research produced in Bangladesh has increased significantly, it has done so in a very unequal way. Most of the expansion comes from a relatively small number of senior academics at the most prominent institutions, while many universities simply contribute zero research output - 11 of the country's 50 public universities reported no research in 2021 (UGC, 2022). As is detailed in a comparative analysis by Hossain (2025), Bangladesh has succeeded at increasing the quantity of its scholarly output without achieving comparable successes in building a foundation upon which young people may effectively contribute to that body of work, lagging similar nations.

Studies by Sawrov et al. (2018) and Chowdhury et al. (2021) explain that Bangladesh's rapid expansion of university seats to accommodate growing demand did not reflect a coordinated approach to strengthening institutional research capacity, and that this will contribute to significant consequences in the job market.

Ejaz et al. (2025) provide evidence of the impact on the job market; graduates entering the workforce invariably lack research competencies valued by industries in the knowledge economy, demonstrating a measurable impact of credentialism that extends far beyond campus. The sheer scale of the underfunding can be observed in official data from the UGC (2022): less than 2% of academic expenditures at universities is devoted to research activities in the country in 2020, the UGC allocated just Taka 100,000 per faculty member toward research in 2022-2023, and Bangladesh's overall score on Research in the Global Knowledge Index 2021 was 19.2 out of 100. These are the backdrop figures against which all other challenges operate.

## 3.2 Structural and Institutional Barriers

### 3.2.1 Chronic underfunding and resource deficits

The overwhelming structural impediment to research is one that Bangladesh's higher education system has suffered from chronically and acutely: a severe shortage of research funding and associated resources. The amount devoted to higher education constitutes one of the lowest proportions of GDP in South Asia (less than 0.2% before 2017) according to Chowdhury et al. (2021), and none of its universities is featured in global rankings. An initial seminal study of 2013 identifies shortages across a range of essential facilities, namely those associated with housing the research, its collection, access to existing scholarly materials, and specialized equipment – with limited funds identified as the primary limitation (Sarkar et al., 2013). Notably, virtually unchanged descriptions of resource deficits, such as limited library and journal access and deficient laboratory equipment appear in studies conducted over a decade later (Chowdhury et al., 2021; UGC, 2022; Chakrabarty, 2025; Alom et al., 2026) even as the economy has been growing.

These deficiencies manifest in very tangible ways for aspiring young researchers; insufficient information and money are explicitly mentioned as critical barriers by 54% and 45% of aspiring young people respectively (Jubair et al., 2025), and these are identified as the two most significant organizational barriers (Jubair & Mehenaz, 2024). Within a region encompassing many universities, including SUST, Jannath (2021) documents constraints that disproportionately impact local researchers due to limited access to materials at city institutions compared to their counterparts in Dhaka. Similar lack of access is observed by Islam, A. (2021) at the regional public institution Rabindra University, indicating the problem's pervasive character. Access to internet connectivity needed for research is also severely limited. Only a third of Bangladesh's students have trouble accessing the Internet (Badiuzzaman et al., 2021) and the digital divide occurs at three key points-hardware, network connectivity, and required digital competencies (Sultana et al., 2024)-any one of which effectively excludes youth researchers.

### 3.2.2 Governance failures and political interference

Layered onto this base of scarcity is another barrier, the failure of effective governance, which derails and deflects institutional attention from efforts that would build researcher capacity. Poor governance "the biggest obstacle to the country's progress" in higher education, encompassing failure to manage resources, implement policies and build research infrastructure (Chakrabarty, 2025), has been compounded by selection of leadership based on political ties rather than professional qualifications and the related prioritization of politics over professional development and research. The events that followed July's Student's Movement in 2024 have recently illustrated in vivid ways that political instability is directly and acutely detrimental to academic and research engagement, and that university welfare systems were unprepared for student crises (Husain, 2026). A major consequence of corruption within educational administrations is its systemic drain of resources from research into networks of patronage and influence (Chakrabarty, 2025).

Habib et al.'s (2023) survey of 347 faculty members across 5 public institutions, including SUST, revealed institutional and leadership failures combined with underfunding to be the top two constraints to faculty research production. With a majority of all 34 public university faculty members possessing either a PhD or an MPhil (Habib et al., 2023; UGC, 2022), many faculty are simply not in a strong position to mentor and support student research. Additionally, political disruption, a lack of quality governance and systemic corruption are cited directly as factors compelling talented students to seek education and research opportunities elsewhere (Sarker et al., 2024).

### 3.2.3 Neoliberal privatization and the credential-production model

The core of the problem, perhaps, is the neoliberal turn in the higher education policy framework of Bangladesh which transforms the university from producers of knowledge to producers of market-based qualifications (Kabir, 2013; Kabir & Chowdhury, 2021). Kabir (2013) has traced through a policy analysis that the university reforms which followed since 1970s with a boost given by the Private University Act 1992, the World Bank driven Strategic Plan for Higher Education 2006-2026, and Higher Education Quality Enhancement Project 2009 turned the higher education toward a more and more market competitiveness, rather than research and knowledge generation. Kabir and Chowdhury (2021) even move forward into the directions of privatization which saw more than 108 private universities established for revenue motives, having a part time capacity, focusing on market demanded curriculum, without academic responsibility or quality assurance. Ahmed (2022) reveals that the COVID-19 response replayed the common six neo-liberal scripts with leaving students on

their own to solve digital challenges and widen the pre-existing disparities. Expanding the university system as explored by Sawrov et al. (2018) and even supported by the employability side by Ejaz et al. (2025) turns graduates who are not well prepared for a research career within knowledge-based economy.

### 3.3 Cultural and Motivational Factors

#### 3.3.1 Rote learning culture and passive pedagogy

Bangladesh higher education institutions follow an established pedagogical and research culture of the rote memorisation, exam success, certificate acquisition extending from school level upwards. As discussed by Rahman et al. (2025) based on school-culture and cross-cultural analyses, students' engagement in exams takes precedence over personal security and curiosity, from early life; for instance, only 27% of schools in the country have a functional library or laboratory and rural students are 60% less likely to get support. Once a student reaches higher education level, he or she has a predisposition shaped by this training and this clashes with open-ended, tolerant-to-ambiguity research environment.

At university level Hossain et al. (2026) quantified the mechanism through a cross-sectional survey, demonstrating significant relationship between interactive teaching and student participation ( = 0.386, $p < .001$), and teacher feedback and students' motivation ( = 0.415, $p < .001$). In other words, a passive and lecture re oriented teaching mode makes students' participation less likely. Hossain (2025) points out cultural barriers toward student research. Ferdoush et al. (2021) indicates that research methodology courses are still non-compulsory and not in the formal syllabus of Bangladeshi undergraduate medical curriculum. Students and faculties lack expertise to conduct research so students mostly write thesis or dissertation by relying on their own resources or through copy pasting of old works or through tutors by last moment preparation of any urgent request of the teacher, as presented by Khan et al. (2023) on the basis of experiences regarding selection of thesis topics of student, and this problem may arise from the structure of the curriculum, to be able to perform clerks rather than critical thinkers, as suggested by Chakrabarty (2025).

#### 3.3.2 Extrinsic motivation and the study-abroad instrumentalization of research

Even in cases of motivation to research, it has been shown that this is largely an extrinsic motivation such as motivating students to pursue their graduate education Abroad rather than developing intellectual interest. (Jubair and Islam, nd) This is supported by Sarker et al (2024) who highlight this research environment abroad as a major pull factor for young people wishing to study Abroad and by Islam, M. (2023) who state insufficient investment in the creativity research sector is one of the major cause for the brain drain, in which 45,000 students who pursue Higher Education in Abroad were found to be left to Bangladesh in 2021. Ejaz et al (2025) illustrate this in the labor market, where employers state that Bangladeshi graduates are research deficient, leaving this credential focused model not to be of assistance in either academic pursuits or the knowledge-based society.

#### 3.3.3 Gendered exclusion from research environments

The primary site of the impact of cultural barriers is the place of gender in Bangladeshi society. It is

well known that there are few young people engaged in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics in Bangladesh, with women accounting for less than 14% of participants (Tabassum, 2025; Islam and Jirattikorn, 2024a; Several government documents). Although there is equality of enrollment for young males and females in primary and secondary education. Kohtamki et al (2024) review documents 'cultural refusal pattern' among female scientists who turn down job opportunities to participate in research-orientated work, based on traditional views that a woman's place is at home. Even within gender, engineers who were found to opt out of research-oriented jobs in favor of academic jobs as a rational decision to survive a hostile research environment. (Islam and Jirattikorn, 2024b)COVID-19, as the recent research conducted by Billah et al (2023) reveals has exacerbate existing gendered barriers as the increased pressure to take on household chores further reduces female students' time for study and research. Also as observed by both Tabassum (2025) and Islam and Jirattikorn (2024a) the lack of visible, senior female role models leads to continued exclusion of women.

### 3.4 The Mentorship and Peer-Community Deficit

#### 3.4.1 Mentorship as the central absent condition

The most consistently highlighted barrier to youth engagement in research is the absence of mentorship. Jubair et al (2025) identify insufficient mentorship as the single most important barrier faced by young researchers (76.2%). This finding has also been reiterated by Yasmeen et al (2025) where insufficient mentorship was identified as a main career challenge for medical students (16.3%), by Ferdoush et al (2021) who reveal that 86.6% of their survey participants indicate a lack of adequate guidance. Habib et al (2023) also highlight on faculty side how government failure in leadership structure has led to a critical lack of mentorship opportunity, and by Jubair and Mehenaz (2024) in identifying lack of guidance as one of the top three organizational barriers.

Naomee and Bayezid (2016) present some of the founding evidence on this issue. The system of Higher education in Bangladesh neither provide any formal mentorship for students, nor any adequate service and guidance for mentors/teachers. Formal mentoring, an important means of academic support system for students and academicians, does not appear to have adequate awareness among many of them in Bangladesh. Ten years later, the study by Jubair et al (2025) further validates that little change has taken place. In the classroom, teacher's feedback has been associated with student's motivation in research, evidenced by positive correlation with motivation = 0.415, suggesting that lack of even informal academic feedback throughout, reduces a young researcher's desire to engage in research activities. This is not simply a shortage, but a structural gap, because Bangladeshi higher educational institutions has not assumed any responsibilities for research socialization of young individuals. (Naomee & Bayezid, 2016; Habib et al., 2023; Chakrabarty, 2025)

#### 3.4.2 Peer community absence and the social capital deficit

Another important factor that is identified as barrier is the non-existence of a normal and routine community of young people involved in research activities. Jubair et al (2025) state that 75.8% considers the non-existence of helpful research community as a key Barrier to engage in research. Similarly, Tanjeela et al (2025) and Billah et al (2023) document how lack of social capital and

connection among students as well as peer network of researchers created by the COVID-19 lockdown has negatively impacted students' ability to cope and build necessary support system. These issues are chronic even for students who attend urban universities as rural students enter new academic institutions without any local peer network (Ali et al., 2021). Islam, A. (2021) also indicates that Peer Influence can be significant predictors of the students' academic engagement in the regional university. Thus, being within a peer community is not a matter of social convenience but a structural necessity for engagement.

Jubair and Islam (nd) highlight the positive side of a helpful peer community were seeing a nearly-peer successfully engaging in research would contribute positively to the young researcher's motivations; the well-established 'role-model effect' (Kuh, 2009; Jones, 2013). Husain (2026) additionally emphasizes how recent political and social turmoil in Bangladesh during the July 2024 Student's Movement significantly ruptured pre-existing academic communities, further diminishing opportunities for students to interact with one another.

### 3.5 Enabling Pathways

#### 3.5.1 Role models, near-peer mentorship, and community building

Among Bangladesh-specific evidence, the intervention best proven to motivate research is also the simplest to implement peer role models. Jubair and Islam (n.d.) empirically demonstrate that simple awareness of a near-peer's research engagement significantly increases own-research aspiration, and this is robust to institutional or material context. The significant effect of an overseas qualification in promoting positive research attitudes among faculty (Habib et al. 2023) strengthens the community-of-practice mechanism at the institutional level. Student feedback, that they want mentors who listen keenly and offer practical guidance (Naomee and Bayezid 2016), suggests a high-quality bar for any formal mentorship initiative. As Tanjeela et al. (2025) and Billah et al. (2023) independently show that research communities become the central coping mechanism when institutions fail to offer anything, intentionally fostering them may be a low-threshold, high-impact way of driving genuine engagement prior to formal institutional investment.

#### 3.5.2 Curriculum Reform & Embedded Research Experiences

When benchmarking against five more successful nations, Hossain (2025) identifies only one critical difference that lies within curriculum content-the complete absence of formal research training at the undergraduate level. From the student's perspective Ferdoush et al. (2021) highlights the same gap, confirming it through student demand that research methods courses should be compulsory. This type of curriculum reform is clearly attainable even for lower-middle- and middle-income countries such as Bhutan (with a well-being focus), and Vietnam (with a competency-based Curriculum Development approach) (Rahman et al. 2025), both of which have broken with traditional exam-centric Pedagogies. Hossain et al. (2026) quantitatively explains why; student feedback relating to interactive pedagogy and instructor engagement is directly predictive of participation and motivation. The provision of more funding coupled with the integration of skills-based research education into the undergraduate curriculum is consequently advocated by Alom et al. (2026).

### 3.5.3 Governance, Digital Access and Gender Sensitive Infrastructure

A clear pathway is offered by Chakrabarty (2025), describing four pillars: policy reform, increased investment, engagement with international organizations and digital transformation. No formal mechanisms exist to hold under-performing institutions accountable for improving their research culture; changing this is itself a profound, systemic shift (UGC Annual Report, 2022). Specifically for research, an enforced governance accountability mechanism is needed for all institutions to ensure they take research quality seriously (Kabir and Chowdhury, 2021). In fact, viewing research culture as a 'public good' that warrants significant investment by an institution, is the only way of transforming current system incentives which place the burden on individual researchers/ students and result in an absence of genuine institutional investment (Ahmed, 2022).

Regarding the implementation challenges of the UGC's 2018-2030 National Strategic Plan for Digital Literacy for higher education students(Sultana et al., 2024; Badiuzzaman et al., 2021), again the gap lies in institutional accountability for execution rather than the development of the plan itself. To combat the structural gendered exclusion that is experienced across all levels of the Bangladeshi education system (Islam and Jirattikorn, 2024a), there is a call for pro-active Institutional engagement with Gender mainstreaming in education policies, Gender-Sensitive environments for research training, and the creation of female mentorship programmes; a targeted institutional investment that can build female faculty visibility and therefore tackle self-reinforcing exclusion. The case for institutionalization of research-skills-competency development into higher education curricula(Ejaz et al., 2025) is likely to hold significant sway given the increasing emphasis on labour market- relevance and potential to leverage an economic narrative for policy engagement.

## 4. Discussion

Taken together, the 35 studies undertaken in the Bangladesh context indicate not so much several problems but rather a single interconnected problem, perpetuated across decades of institutional expansion, with clearly documented structural logic and political reinforcement. The fundamental issue of chronic underfunding prevents institutions from investing in the basic research infrastructure necessary to support teaching and student engagement (Sarkar et al. 2013; Chowdhury et al., 2021; UGC, 2022). The dominant neo-liberal philosophy of credentialization privileges outputs like certificates and degrees above and beyond the process of inquiry and research development (Kabir, 2013; Kabir & Chowdhury, 2021; Ahmed, 2022; Ejaz et al. 2025). The deeply ingrained rote-learning pedagogy, propagated through both school and higher education institutions, produces graduates more adept at recalling information and passing exams than at critically questioning it (Rahman et al. 2025; Hossain et al., 2026; Khan et al. 2023). Lack of formalized mentorship denies young aspiring researchers' guidance (Naomee & Bayezid, 2016; Jubair et al. 2025; Habib et al., 2023). Consequently, in the absence of a strong normative community for doing research, this remains the exception rather than the rule (Jubair et al., 2025; Tanjeela et al. 2025; Billah et al. 2023). This reinforcing web explains how the publication output per academic has grown whilst engagement with research remains stubbornly low among young people (Alom et al. 2026).

Three over-arching findings merit consideration in any policy debate: firstly, the aspirational participation gap, which is huge, persistent, and driven by institutional barriers, rather than lack of student motivation – 47-66% of students aspire to research (Yasmeen et al., 2025; Ferdoush et al., 2021) whereas only 21.5% engage in it (Yasmeen et al. 2025). Failure to convert ambition into action signifies systemic failure, not individual student deficit. Secondly, an institution and region-based clustering of research resources throughout the country (UGC, 2022; Chowdhury et al., 2021; Jannath, 2021; Islam, A. 2021), making access to opportunity a function of institution rather than merit. Finally, the issue of mentorship: less as a component in the puzzle, more as the binding element that makes even the other pieces immovable – it is the consistently identified, single biggest barrier across every data type, methodology and level of analysis in this corpus.

The stark realities of student emigration highlight the enormous long-term cost of these barriers. For two years running, an estimated 45,000 students have emigrated to higher education abroad (Sarker et al. 2024; Islam, M., 2023), citing reasons such as the research environment as key push factors. The recent July 2024politicalinstability in Bangladesh served as an 'episode' that exacerbated underlying structural constraints by amplifying the negative impact of governmental failure and social upheaval on youth disengagement (Husain, 2026). The consequence is the educational establishment educating youth solely to export their skills, and, critically, their research talent and future mentoring capacity back out of the country to fuel development elsewhere. The economic value of this, measured by foregone research output and contribution, stifled mentoring, and reproduction of underlying inequalities, is substantial(Ejaz et al. 2025).

## 5. Conclusion

A total of 35 Bangladesh-context studies reveal that institutional and cultural barriers hinder youth engagement in research as a self-sustaining system due to historical development, political fortification and daily operations. Institutions are responsible for failure to provide environment fostering students' research capabilities, not students' deficit in this aspect. The evidence gathered is overwhelming, indicating that university investment in academic research totals only 2 percent of total academic budget, with 11 public universities yielding no publications at all (UGC, 2022).

There is no organized mentoring system within the higher education sector (Naomee & Bayezid, 2016; Jubair et al., 2025). A student teaching culture, promoting memorization, perpetuates the resistance to research from elementary school to the university level (Rahman et al., 2025; Hossain et al., 2026). About 14 percent of female student STEM participation is due to gender inequality in the form of societal norms, negative social atmosphere and absence of professional models (Tabassum, 2025). 3-tier digital inequality blocks students in terms of convenient access to research literature-as many as 67.5% students remain deprived of access (Badiuzzaman et al., 2021). 3 decades of neoliberal adjustments transformed universities into institutions that primarily produce academic certificates rather than knowledge (Kabir, 2013; Kabir & Chowdhury, 2021; Ahmed, 2022). The system is supplemented by episodic and ongoing disruption due to political instability and governing challenges (Chakrabarty, 2025; Husain, 2026; Sarker et al., 2024). Peer relationships and social networks necessary for overcoming academic barriers are underdeveloped or broken for regional students, rural

background students and students in regions in turmoil (Tanjeela et al., 2025; Billah et al., 2023; Ali et al., 2021; Islam, A., 2021).

Between 47% and 76% of Bangladeshi students in various studies expressed enthusiasm in research, indicating clear aspiration (Yasmeen et al., 2025; Ferdoush et al., 2021; Jubair et al., 2025). However, institutions lack the structure, environment, and governance to translate enthusiasm into participation. Moreover, transforming students' interests into active participation in research is not only crucial for academics, but for the country too, since Bangladesh needs research engagement in its normal university curriculum to support its growth, become a knowledge-economy, and retain its talented young population (Ejaz et al., 2025; Alom et al., 2026).

### 5.1 Limitations

This review of studies on Bangladesh context has some limitations that need to be acknowledged. Only English language studies have been considered; therefore, relevant information might be missed if contained in Bangla-language research papers and NGO documents. Some relevant papers were accessible only by payment and hence the review of their full text could not be ascertained including those from Springer, Taylor & Francis and Kohtamki et al. (2024).

There were two research papers which were preprinted, meaning not undergone any formal peer-reviewed process (e.g. Jubair & Mehenaz, 2024 and Ferdoush et al., 2021). The strongest empirical studies used in this review predominantly focus on the students of medicine whereas the research involving those studying engineering, humanities and social sciences, are fewer compared to medical students. Thematic synthesis inevitably involves subject judgment during theme development and coding process and is acknowledged as a limitation in all qualitative systematic reviews (Thomas & Harden, 2008).

### 5.2 Future Research Directions

The areas of future research should be focused on: (1) longitudinally tracking aspirations and engagement of students with research during entire undergraduate level using studies following one cohort of students; (2) employing mixed methods research design with the aims of obtaining data at the survey level alongside insights into students' own accounts; (3) conducting disaggregated analysis by academic disciplines that will look beyond the medical students, also considering those who belong to social sciences, humanities, and engineering; (4) carrying out evaluation research studies on different pilot initiatives in building mentors or introducing curriculum related research elements in the universities in Bangladesh; and (5) involving students in the research design, analysis and interpretation processes through a participative action research approach. Dedicated efforts towards a research study specifically on Sylhet context and at Shahjalal University of Science and Technology (SUST) were not highlighted and can be focused on, as it is present in only one included study (Jannath, 2021). Considering the current political context after the 2024 July transition, it would be useful to analyze how such changes may affect the youth's involvement in research (Husain, 2026).

### 5.3 Policy and Practice Recommendations

Based on the systematic review above, the policy and practice recommendations for policymakers, university authorities, the UGC, and civil society organizations are as follows:

Establish a mandatory formal mentoring program for students at the university level in all public institutions, bringing together research mentors, graduate students and undergraduate students with sufficient time commitment, required mentor training for those wanting support (Naomee & Bayezid, 2016) and a formal structure rewarding mentoring as part of academic service (Habib et al., 2023).

Institute undergraduate research courses, a mandate for doing a thesis and research methodology, and make them part of the curricula of all disciplines so that engaging in research is a normal university practice (Ferdoush et al., 2021; Hossain, 2025). The best practices of Vietnam and Bhutan are models for success in curriculum reforms (Rahman et al., 2025).

At least triple the current research allocation per university academic from Tk1 lakh given by the UGC; set up a scholarship program that funds the research by undergraduate students at institutions at all levels including the regional ones (UGC, 2022; Alom et al., 2026; Islam, A., 2021).

Create the opportunity to engage students in research through a network of research journals run by students, supported by universities and maintained in central archives; this will provide them with opportunities to publish, socialize with peers in academia and gain mentorship (Jubair et al., 2025).

Require the universities to periodically report on indices related to research such as undergraduate engagement rates, mentor participation and journal access, and base the UGC grants based on these performance metrics (Chakrabarty, 2025; UGC, 2022) so that under-performing institutions improve accountability.

Initiate a nationwide network of women mentors in STEM research and facilitate public engagement by featuring woman academics and scientists at all career levels, emphasizing their young age in the early career stages (Tabassum, 2025; Islam & Jirattikorn, 2024a).

Mandate the provision of gender-appropriate facilities in all UGC sponsored projects, with sensitive safety provisions, provision for flexibility and time for family matters, and for a secure and supervised environment for research (Islam & Jirattikorn, 2024a, 2024b; Kohtamki et al., 2024; Billah et al., 2023).

Establish a national digital research assistance program that includes subsidized internet access for public university students and the university libraries; this is a need because many do not have an alternative and digital research training for first year students is necessary (Badiuzzaman et al., 2021; Sultana et al., 2024).

Amend the UGC faculty appointment criteria to require that all permanently appointed academics be a holder of PhD; otherwise, 60% of academic staff may not be able to effectively train young research-errs (Habib et al., 2023; UGC, 2022; Chakrabarty, 2025).

Support the building of students' social capital by introducing facilitated peer interaction groups in support of learning and research activities and providing a structure for regenerating the social fabric of the students' following times of disruption or uncertainty (Tanjeela et al., 2025; Billah et al., 2023; Ali et al., 2021; Husain, 2026).

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