

# The Daily Star

## Brac University navigating through the Covid-19 pandemic

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New life, new job and hello Brac University

It was during my first trip to Dhaka in 2019 that my seatmate was curious how and why I want to live and work in Dhaka, Bangladesh. And yes, it is a unique choice for a foreigner. I'm not sure if I would have gone knowing a pandemic was going to break out. Let alone deciding to stay during a pandemic. Looking back now, would I do it all again? Without a doubt, yes!

The Covid-19 crisis showed us how fragile our world is and how quickly we can all be ripped out of our normal lives. Life won't be the same as before. Neither will education. Education will be better than before.

But let me start from the beginning. A little over a year ago, I accepted a job offer to work with Professor Vincent Chang, Vice-Chancellor at Brac University, to build the mission and vision of the institution. I never actually heard of Brac University before. I've lived in Shanghai for a few years and heard of BRAC, but not the university. BRAC is the largest NGO in the world, so how come the university is off the radar? I jumped into my new adventure head-on, ready to find out.

Five months into my new job, the Covid-19 pandemic broke out, and with that, we were about to ring in the next generation of education. Unforeseen, unprepared and basically overnight.

My new friend, the mask

March 16, 2020 was the turning point for Brac University. It was our last in-office day and it started off so normally, dealing with the insanely chaotic traffic on the way to the office. Oddly enough, I was still quite relaxed about the Coronavirus. One of those things that I can't control, so why worry, right?

Pollution had come down a little bit for the first time in weeks. I never liked wearing a mask in polluted air. A lot of expats do, but I always felt suffocated. On my way to

the office elevator, I ran into my colleague Fariba, who was wearing her mask and I asked her if she did it because of Covid. She said 'No Irene, I wear it most of the time when I'm out'. I realized, that by not wearing it, I exposed myself to not just one health risk, but to two. The pollution is visible, the virus isn't. An invisible enemy that is potentially deadly.

Now, the mask is my friend. We go everywhere together. I'd like to take her on a trip, show her my home country, but not just yet.

### Expect the unexpected

At 4.30 PM on March 16, we had an emergency meeting following a government announcement to close all educational institutions. At 7 PM, I left. And Brac University closed its doors – for the rest of the year. The Covid-19 pandemic had reached Bangladesh.

So, now what? The first days of lockdown felt a bit unreal. Like a movie-apocalypse. Maybe the new virus will turn us all into Zombies?

The noisy, pulsating, lively, densely populated city of Dhaka slammed on the breaks. It was like a ghost town. A scenario that nobody thought would be possible. We didn't know what to expect, but we all knew that the health system in Bangladesh would collapse if the Coronavirus spreads. While people in America and Europe were furious about the government-imposed restrictions, we stayed in our homes. Waiting.

### Going pancontinental in the pandemic

Everything came to a halt. My friends and family asked if I was taking one of the repatriation flights. Many of our internationals were leaving and I was in touch with the German Embassy, waiting for a flight back home.

The American Embassy called my boss, Professor Chang and urged him to leave. So did our colleagues. He told us: "I plan to be back as early as mid-April and no later than late April. The VC's office is always open!" He didn't even check out of the hotel, where he stays and I know every month he paid his hotel bill, assuming he'd come back soon. It wasn't until October that he was able to return.

Our senior management was spread out across the globe in different time zones. Imagine having to coordinate 4, sometimes 5 different times zones to call a senior management meeting. We had people in Australia, Dhaka, America's East and West Coast and Europe. There was always someone in a meeting who had to sacrifice to be there. If for one person the sun had already set, for another it had not risen at the 'same' time. Once, I had a meeting with a colleague in Nairobi and one in New York City at 11 PM. The Nairobi colleague didn't realize I was in Dhaka and she had to push it back for an hour. It was an important meeting, so I stayed

up, reminding myself that I'm not alone with this problem. Many of my colleagues took meetings after midnight. For our summer 2020 orientation ceremony, Professor Chang pulled an all-nighter as the ceremony started at 4 AM West Coast time.

Looking back now, it seems almost comical how hopeful we were that all would resume to normalcy after a month or two. We were in the process of hiring new faculty and staff from abroad. We had everything lined up for them to come to Dhaka, and so did they. Under the circumstances, with a strict lockdown and cancelled flights, how would we bring new hires in? Some of them joined regardless, but they aren't physically here yet. Just like our students are not physically back on campus.

No rest for the weary

In April, it did not seem like the situation would resume to normalcy anytime soon. The numbers of infected people and deaths kept going up. Weeks and months went by. The university closure was extended, and extended, and extended ... and will most likely be extended again, as it should.

At the same time, the global economy suffered tremendously. Many have lost their jobs. Airlines had to ground their planes and some went bankrupt. Many countries completely closed their borders and have still not reopened. Worldwide, the tourism industry and others were badly impacted. What we're seeing now might not even be the full blow. The long term ramifications will show over the course of the next two years.

## Challenges and Responses

The mental pressure was immense. When we closed in March, the spring semester was almost over and it was unrealistic to let our students take finals. Professor Chang decided to finish the spring semester early and to not have final exams. That was a big risk, because the University Grants Commission (UGC), a government organization that directs public and private universities in Bangladesh, at that point did not give any such directive. We faced a lot of public criticism in the following months.

It was May when the UGC approved of our decision and urged all universities not to hold exams. During those two months, from March until May, the pending decision by UGC hung over our heads like a sword of Damocles.

It was a relief for us and for the students. Shortly after the university closure, Saif Hossain, Assistant Professor, Brac Business School, told me that "this is probably the first time in a decade that the students agreed with *all* the strategic decisions that have been made by the university." He said the feedback he received from the students was that the university's actions resonated with our students' needs.

In his Orientation speech for the first batch of our fully virtual semester, Professor Chang introduced his "Challenges and Responses" framework. "An institution cannot control where challenges come from and what kind of challenges they are, but it can certainly manage its responses. How it responds to the challenges defines the institution."

Our students are our priority. Every decision we make revolves around the question how this will help the students. Laying low would have not helped them.

### Learning to virtually university – step by step

This is my first pandemic. So, how do we do all this virtually now? And in Bangladesh with all the problems in this country?

Step by step, we tackled one issue after the next. The first was online teaching. Many students left Dhaka to be with their families in the rural areas of Bangladesh. There, the internet comes and goes, so does electricity. Zoom and live-streamed classes are not reliable lecture delivery mechanisms for students with unreliable internet connections. We needed something that is tailored to typical problems of virtual learning.

Professor Mahbub Majumdar, Dean, School of Data and Science spearheaded the development of our online learning platform buX. Nur Mohammad Shafiullah, one of his former math olympiad students was our MIT consultant, and another one of Mahbub's former math olympiad students, Tahmid Rafi, was the Team Leader.

With buX, students can watch pre-recorded classes at their own convenience and teachers offer virtual 'office hours' and discussion rounds. This flexibility is a huge advantage.

Developing buX in such a short time meant a lot of work for Professor Mahbub and his team. Sure, everyone's jobs would have been easier if we hadn't developed buX. But then, our students would have to deal with many issues that are avoidable. buX isn't perfect and we keep improving it, so it will be a vital component of Brac University in the future.

Economy goes down – financial assistance goes up

The second big issue was the economic downfall that effected our students and their families financially. Not even two months after we closed, super cyclone Amphan hit Bangladesh's coast. Then, the Monsoon flooded nearly one-third of the country and I wondered if next water would turn to blood.

I learnt to appreciate financial assistance through scholarships when I was studying at UCSB. Professor Chang also knows what it means to work his way up, and how important financial aid is. I think that's why it was implicit for him to launch the Student Assistant Fund (SAF) with around US\$5 million for summer and fall semester 2020. This fund is designated to students who are affected by the pandemic.

Thousands applied and thousands were processed within days. The Campus Life team and our new Registrar, Dave Dowland, who joined our team in the middle of the pandemic, managed the fund. I have seen with my own eyes what a mammoth project it was for them.

Pandemic won't stop student-centric universities

The sad side of virtual learning is that we can't interact with the students like we used to. You don't know this, but initially, I applied for a position in the Student Life department at Brac University. Someone else was selected and I was offered my current position instead. The reason I applied to work with students was that I truly believe we should invest in the young generation. That is what drives me. That is why I chose a career in academia. If we do our jobs right, we can change the lives of our students.

I virtually reached out to one of our undergraduates, Ms Anika Bushra, a senior in economics, and she filled me in on how she can now schedule her classes more

conveniently with buX because they don't overlap anymore. Plus, she's not commuting to campus, which saves time. That allows her to take extra classes and to graduate soon.

Anika also took an online summer class with the Global History Lab at Princeton University. Brac University and Princeton work together through the Open Society University Network (OSUN) and being able to offer this class to our students has been one of my personal highlights this year. As a humanities nerd, I could now go entirely off topic and babble about how wonderful the class is. But, my space here is limited, and you may never finish reading this article.

Tara Suri, the teaching assistant from Princeton who worked with our students, said that they were "exceptionally engaged in challenging times". As you can tell, I really like bragging about our students. I hope to provide them with more opportunities like this – a university experience that is above average and inspires them to give their best.

### Facing exhaustion and powering through

Another key element is our senior management. The team is essential, but neither they, nor their families are immune to the virus.

Samia Huq, Dean, School of General Education, lost her mother-in-law due to Covid-19. Dr. Samia is a very upbeat and positive woman, who takes pride in her work and leadership. She was traumatized and what made the coping even more difficult was the isolation when we need the support of others the most.

In the midst of the pandemic, it was incredible to see how our students organized themselves in groups to provide help for others. Zamima Islam Sabaa, one of our undergraduate students in Economics, won the international COV-AID award given by OSUN and the Talloires Network of Engaged Universities for her support of under-stocked hospitals in Dhaka with basic essential commodities. Yes, I like bragging about our students.

### Looking to the future

"Irene, is your shoulder ok? How are you doing? Everything ok?"

In August, I injured my shoulder from computer typing. How is that even possible? Professor Chang is very respectful of his team's privacy. He never asks questions regarding our private lives, but I appreciated him asking and I know he wondered why I hadn't gone back home to Germany.

I would be lying if I said I was always OK. There were, and still are, times when my nerves are on edge. Many of our colleagues had and, to this day, have Covid-19. Germany, the medically fully equipped poster child, recorded over 1000 deaths from Covid-19 *per day* in December 2020. I didn't go home in the summer because I thought it would be safer to go by the end of the year. Oh well ...

Putting in the work payed off. Brac University has handled the crisis better than anticipated: Student enrollment for summer 2020 has gone up 50% compared to summer 2019. It is the best enrollment rate in the history of Brac University. Fall 2020 enrollment went up 80%. We know of students who transferred from other universities in Dhaka to us because of buX. We invested about US\$5 million in SAF and we are still able to control our finances, which is an outstanding achievement in a global crisis.

Professor Chang proved to be a contrarian with all of his actions going against what was advised. Take action 'without fear' is what he's been telling me from day one.

The pandemic is testing us in so many ways. It tested not only my ability to do my job, but my willingness to. It taught me gratitude for things I easily take for granted: health, family, friends, freedom, to name a few. It taught me to find happiness in the most worrying times. And, I'm grateful to Bangladesh and its people for giving me a safe home during this pandemic.

Brac University will have its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2021. Vaccine or no vaccine, it will grow from a traditional campus university into the model for future higher education that integrates virtual learning as a vital part – Brac University 2.0.

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