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In conversation with Prof. Dr M Azizur Rahman, founder VC, Uttara University

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Prof. Dr M Azizur Rahman is the founder Vice-Chancellor of Uttara University (UU). In 1997, he established the Dr M Azizur Rahman Trust (DAR Trust) – a non-profit entity under the Societies Registration Act, operating social welfare clinics, hospitals, and educational institutions. Notably, the Education and Development Institute (EDI) pioneered private-sector BEd programs, and Olympia Institute of Physical Education (OIPE) introduced BPed degrees. Later, Uttara University emerged, integrating OIPE into its Physical Education department, which is the first of its kind academic department offering Sports Science related degrees in the country.

In 1999, Dr Azizur initiated Development Assistance & Trading (DAT) Ltd, a vertically integrated business producing and exporting ready-made garments, pivotal in export industry growth. He also established the Institute of Management and Information Technology (IMIT) offering BSc and MSc degrees in Computer Science, and BBA and MBA degrees affiliated with the Pondicherry University, India.

Campus sat down for a one-on-one interview with Dr Azizur to talk about Uttara University's journey so far and the institution's vision going forward.

Campus (C): What sparked the desire to establish Uttara University (UU)?

Dr Azizur (A): My desire to establish UU was ignited by several factors, stemming from a profound belief in the transformative power of education. In 1997, I noticed a certain kind of death in the quality of higher education institutions in Uttara and its surrounding areas, coupled with the burgeoning demand for advanced learning opportunities. It compelled me to establish the DAR Trust. UU was later founded under this trust in 2003.

Having dedicated my career to academia and research, I recognised the need to establish a university that would not only provide academic excellence but also foster innovation, critical thinking, and holistic development among students. I envisioned UU as a hub of intellectual discourse, where students could explore their passions, expand their horizons, and emerge as leaders in their respective fields.

C: The university has now been around for two decades – how has it managed to stay updated on the latest trends in the higher education sector?

A: Keeping the institution abreast of developments in the field of higher education has been one of my top priorities. To keep up with these changes and be relevant in the ever-changing educational scene, we have implemented numerous techniques throughout the past twenty years.

Promoting a mindset of lifelong learning and flexibility among faculty and staff has been an important strategy. To keep up with the latest developments and best practices in their domains, faculty members are encouraged to participate in workshops, conferences, and other professional development activities.

We also have local and worldwide connections and collaborations with other educational institutions, businesses, and research centres. Opportunities for research cooperation, information sharing, and exposure to international trends and viewpoints in higher education are presented by these partnerships.

To keep up with the demands of the business, developments in technology, and the evolving needs of our students, we also routinely assess and revise our academic programmes and curriculum. Doing so guarantees that our grads will have the know-how to thrive in the modern, competitive work market.

Additionally, we simplify administrative procedures, increase overall university efficiency, and improve teaching and learning experiences through the use of technology and innovation. We can respond to students' ever-changing requirements and shifts in educational paradigms by fully embracing digitalisation and integrating state-of-the-art technology into our operations.

All things considered, UU has been able to keep up with the times and remain a top university in Bangladesh thanks to its dedication to innovation, excellence, and flexibility.

C: UU's current motto is "Excellence in Higher Education and Research". Could you share how the university stays committed to this motto? Could you also kindly share a few ways the university is prioritising research at the moment?

A: Achieving and maintaining excellence in higher education and research has consistently ranked high on our list of priorities. Keeping the university's reputation for academic brilliance and promoting a spirit of research and innovation are two of our most important goals.

Our dedication to excellence is shown in the stringent quality assurance procedures we have put in place and the fact that we work tirelessly to improve our academic programmes. Every member of our faculty is a highly trained expert in their field and is committed to providing students with an excellent education and helping them develop their full potential as learners.

When it comes to research, UU is all about research. Professors and students have plenty of opportunities to get involved. To help researchers and encourage joint research projects, we have set up research centres and institutes in several fields.

Students and teachers alike are strongly encouraged to take part in research, publish their findings in peer-reviewed journals, and present their work at conferences both nationally and internationally. Supporting faculty research projects and encouraging unique research ideas, we also offer financing opportunities and research awards. To promote research collaborations, information exchange, and technology transfer, we have also formed partnerships and collaborations with organisations in the academic, government, and business sectors.

In general, the dedication to providing first-rate academic programmes and cutting-edge research at UU has not wavered. We aim to contribute to the growth of society, the success of our students and faculty members, and the expansion of knowledge through our unwavering commitment to fostering research and innovation.

C: UU has something called the "Drop-Out Prevention Unit" catering to the mental health needs of its students. It's an admirable initiative. Could you please share what this unit aims to achieve and how it does so?

A: The Dropout Prevention Cell at Uttara University functions as an exemplar of assistance and direction for students who are confronted with obstacles that have the potential to impede their academic progression. With a strong dedication to cultivating an atmosphere of success and inclusiveness, our office strives to prevent untimely dropouts from scholastic endeavours and support the comprehensive growth of each individual student.

Central to its mission is a collection of unambiguous goals that seek to tackle the complex factors that contribute to the high rates of student dropout. Its primary objective is to recognise and alleviate the elements that contribute to student dropout, encompassing academic, personal, financial, and other related concerns. Through proactive intervention and individualised support, our objective is to enable students to surmount challenges and maintain their commitment to their academic endeavours.

The primary obligations of the Dropout Prevention Cell comprise an extensive array of endeavours formulated to provide assistance to students throughout their academic trajectory. These responsibilities encompass facilitating access to resources and support services, offering academic counselling and guidance, and cultivating a supportive atmosphere that ensures students feel appreciated, listened to, and assisted.

Additionally, this office works in close collaboration with faculty, staff, and other relevant stakeholders to execute early identification and intervention strategies. This ensures that students receive the necessary support before the escalation of challenges. Its mission is to establish a campus community that provides equal opportunities for all students to flourish and achieve success by cultivating an environment characterised by empathy, understanding, and proactive support. The cell strives to eliminate impediments to education, enable students to surmount challenges, and establish a learning environment that is more comprehensive and fair for every individual.

C: How happy are you with how far Uttara University has come in the past 20 years?

A: I am deeply honoured by the extraordinary trajectory that our institution has traversed throughout the previous two decades. Observing the development and transformation of Uttara University into a preeminent establishment of tertiary education in Bangladesh has been exceedingly satisfying and gratifying.

As I contemplate the milestones and accomplishments that have been accumulated since the establishment of the university, I am filled with a sense of gratification and satisfaction. Ever since its inception, Uttara University has grown into a thriving academic community committed to advancing knowledge, fostering originality, and making a positive contribution to society.

I am notably ecstatic about the progress we have achieved in furthering our scholarly programmes, broadening our research endeavours, and improving the holistic student experience. The success and standing of Uttara University have been significantly

influenced by our dedication to research, community engagement, and high-quality education.

Furthermore, I express profound gratitude for the steadfast commitment and valuable input provided by our faculty, staff, students, alumni, and stakeholders, all of whom have been instrumental in facilitating our trajectory of development and achievement. Their diligence, enthusiasm, and dedication to excellence have propelled the achievements of Uttara University.

Although I am filled with pride regarding our progress thus far, I am cognizant of the fact that much remains to be achieved. With a forward-looking perspective, my aspiration is that Uttara University sustains its progress, fosters innovation, and upholds excellence. I possess an unwavering conviction that through the collaborative endeavours of our university community, we shall persistently advance higher education and research in Bangladesh and beyond in a substantial manner.

C: The higher education sector is evolving rapidly; there are now more fields of study, subjects and technologies to explore, and a never-ending scope of research opportunities. The possibilities are endless when it comes to university education. All that being said, what excites you the most about the future of higher education in Bangladesh, and how do you think Uttara University can contribute to it?

A: I am deeply enthusiastic regarding the boundless prospects that higher education in Bangladesh possesses in terms of innovation, revelation, and societal influence. The dynamic nature of the higher education sector offers unparalleled opportunities for revolutionising the methods by which we instruct, acquire knowledge, and interact with it.

I am most enthusiastic about the prospects for interdisciplinary collaboration and cross-disciplinary investigation in Bangladesh's higher education system. The emergence of new academic disciplines and technological advancements have created an increasing demand for interdisciplinary approaches to tackle intricate challenges and capitalise on promising prospects. Adopting an interdisciplinary approach empowers students to confront practical challenges and make significant societal contributions by cultivating their ingenuity, critical reasoning, and problem-solving proficiencies.

Furthermore, the growing focus on research and innovation offers universities promising prospects to advance the limits of understanding and generate substantial contributions to the progress of society. Research-oriented universities, such as Uttara University, possess a significant responsibility in propelling innovation and progress in Bangladesh through the cultivation of an atmosphere that values investigation, revelation, and scholarly distinction among their staff and pupils.

Uttara University is dedicated to advancing higher education by consistently refining its scholarly programmes, research endeavours, and pedagogical methodologies to cater

to the changing demands of both students and society at large. The significance of research-driven education, interdisciplinary collaboration, and experiential learning in equipping students for success in the workforce of the twenty-first century is duly acknowledged.

In addition, we are committed to expanding the reach of our academic programmes, enhancing teaching and learning experiences, and improving access to education through the utilisation of technology and digital innovation. By adopting digitalization and integrating emerging technologies into our pedagogical approaches, we can furnish pupils with personalised, interactive, and immersive learning experiences that equip them with the necessary skills to flourish in a world that is undergoing swift transformations.

Uttara University is fundamentally positioned to influence the trajectory of higher education in Bangladesh through the cultivation of an environment that promotes ingenuity, investigation, and distinction. Through our dedication to interdisciplinary cooperation, education rooted in research, and digital ingenuity, our objective is to enable the forthcoming cohort of visionaries, pioneers, and agents of transformation to effectuate constructive transformations and offer significant contributions to the community.