

**STUDENT MIGRATION FROM BANGLADESH TO THE UK**

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## FOREWORD

The Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) is working on understanding the links between migration and the development of sending and receiving countries, as well as the implications for those who migrate. Initially, RMMRU's research focused on short term contract migration from Bangladesh to the Middle East. Since 2002, it has extended its work to migration from Bangladesh to developed countries, which began with a study looking at institutionalising diaspora linkages with the US and UK. Later, RMMRU fellow, Benjamin Zeitlyn, and intern, Siobhan MacPhee continued to generate new knowledge on diaspora and development.

Student migration constitutes an important part of the migration from Bangladesh to developed countries. However, no systematic research on this area had been conducted. In 2005, with the help of the British Council and support from the British High Commission, RMMRU initiated a new project entitled 'Transnationalism and Diaspora', under which the issue student migration from Bangladesh to the UK was explored.

Penelope Anthias, a research intern who joined RMMRU under our partnership with the Sussex Migration and Development Research Centre (DRC), who we found to be deeply committed to research and to all other activities conducted by RMMRU, was chosen to conduct this research. Through rigorous discussion sessions, we identified major research questions and a thorough methodology, and Penelope completed the research very competently. She presented her research findings in a dialogue in the British Council attended by 150 persons. Realising the importance of the work, we decided to publish the research as a RMMRU occasional paper. We congratulate Penelope for this great work. We are also sure that this occasional paper will be of good use to students and researchers, as well as to Government and civil society in Bangladesh and the UK.

Tasneem Siddiqui

## **Acknowledgments**

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## CONTENTS

<b>SECTION 1</b>	<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>6</b>
	Objectives	6
	Rationale	6
	Theoretical Framework	7
	Methodology	8
	Structure	9
<b>SECTION 2</b>	<b>MOTIVATIONS, PATTERNS AND TRENDS</b>	<b>10</b>
	Motivations for Studying in the UK	10
	Pattern of Student Migration from Bangladesh to the UK	12
	<i>Destinations for Bangladeshi Students</i>	12
	<i>Profile of Applicants</i>	15
	<i>Subjects Studied</i>	16
<b>SECTION 3</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION OF STUDENT MIGRATION PROCESS</b>	<b>17</b>
	<b>Step 1: Information on UK Study</b>	<b>17</b>
	<i>Role of the British Council</i>	17
	<i>Other Sources of Information</i>	18
	<i>Advertising for UK Study</i>	19
	<b>Step 2: Applying for Study</b>	<b>19</b>
	<i>Applying through UCAS</i>	19
	<i>Direct Applications</i>	19
	<i>Entrance Requirements</i>	20
	<i>Funding Options</i>	20
	<b>Step 3: Applying for a Student Visa</b>	<b>22</b>
	<i>Role of the British High Commission</i>	22
	<i>Role of Overseas Study Counseling Agencies</i>	22
<b>SECTION 4</b>	<b>EVALUATION OF STUDENT MIGRATION PROCESS</b>	<b>23</b>
	Access to Information	23
	Meeting Financial Requirements	26
	Deceptive and Fraudulent Practices: Unscrupulous Counseling Agencies and Bogus UK Colleges	27
	i. Charging Fees	28
	ii. Conning Students Out of Money	28
	iii. Fraudulent Practices	28
	iv. Misleading Genuine Students About Quality of Institutions	30
	v. Student Migration as a Route to Labour Migration	31
<b>SECTION 5</b>	<b>EXPERIENCES OF UK STUDY</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>SECTION 6</b>	<b>THE UK'S NEW POINTS-BASED SYSTEM</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>SECTION 7</b>	<b>CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	<b>37</b>
	Conclusion	37
	Theoretical Implications of research	39
	Policy Recommendations	40
	Limitations of Study and Suggestions for Further Research	42
	<b>Bibliography and Websites</b>	<b>44</b>

<b>ANNEX 1: Interviews</b>	<b>44</b>
<b>ANNEX 2: Workshop, Education Fairs and Agency Visits</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>ANNEX 3: List of Participants at British Council Dialogue</b>	<b>47</b>

## **SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION**

### **Objectives**

Student migration is an increasingly important phenomenon in Bangladesh and the UK ranks among the most popular and highly regarded study destinations. However, as elsewhere, this migration has received scant attention from the government, academics or researchers.

This study set out to enhance our understanding of student migration from Bangladesh to the UK and to evaluate the current system for managing it, with a view to looking at how the process could be developed or improved, in order to maximize the potential benefits for all parties; Bangladesh, the UK and individual students.

Firstly, it seeks to enhance understanding of the current patterns and trends in student migration from Bangladesh to the UK and of the motivations driving Bangladeshis to study in the UK. By providing empirical data on a specific case study, this report also seeks to interrogate some of the theoretical models that have previously been used to conceptualize international student migration.

This study looks in detail at the process of applying for study in the UK, describing the stages of this process and the role of various actors involved. It then seeks to evaluate this process and the role of the different actors, identifying what major problems exist. In particular, it aims to draw attention to the experiences of Bangladeshi students in applying for UK study: for example, exploring what sources of information are available to them, what problems and obstacles they face in the application process, and their experience of studying in the UK.

In doing so, this study seeks to identify how this process could be improved or developed. To this end, the report puts forward a number of policy recommendations through which some of these problems could be addressed.

### **Rationale**

Roughly 2 million students per year study outside of their home countries and Asian students make up a large proportion of these, especially in Australia, the UK and the US (World Migration Report, 2005). Despite a rapid growth in student mobility and its clear importance, international student migration remains a vastly under-researched phenomenon. In the context of Bangladesh, the dearth of literature on student migration contrasts with the extensive attention paid to other migration patterns, particularly labour migration. This study aims to contribute towards filling this gap in the literature by shedding some light on student migration in the specific context of Bangladesh and the UK.

Student migration has huge potential benefits for both sending and receiving countries, as well as for individual students themselves. The benefits of student migration for the receiving country have long been recognized, both in terms of 'brain gain' and foreign income gained from overseas students, which the British Council estimates will be 13 billion GBP per year by 2020 (British Council Report, 2004).

In addition, there has been increasing recognition that student migration can bring substantial benefits for the sending as well as the receiving country. This highlights the importance for Bangladesh of managing its student migration as effectively as possible. In order to achieve this goal, it is necessary to understand the nature of student migration in specific contexts and to evaluate the current system through which it takes place.

This research has been undertaken under a joint project between the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) and the British Council in Bangladesh, which is supported by the British High Commission. This project is aimed at discouraging irregular migration, compiling information on current trends in regular and irregular migration from Bangladesh to the UK, and disseminating information to the Bangladeshi public on formal migration options and processes.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This report is aimed primarily at describing and evaluating the current system for managing student migration from Bangladesh to the UK. Broader questions, such as the developmental impact of student migration or how it should be theorised cannot be discussed here in any detail. Nevertheless, the findings of this research do have implications for our understanding of international student migration more generally and provide an opportunity to test theoretical models against empirical data. It is therefore important to consider what theoretical perspectives have previously been used to understand student migration.

Early discussions of student migration were linked to the debate on 'brain drain' (Skeldon, 1997). Originally used to describe the migration of UK scientists and doctors to the United States, 'brain drain' quickly came to be applied to migration from former colonies to the UK. The literature on 'brain drain' assumes that skilled migration from poorer to richer countries driven by the requirements of the international labour market necessarily has a negative impact on sending countries, hindering their development. Although it generally refers to migration of skilled professionals, student migration has also been often viewed as a category of skilled migration which constitutes a loss of human capital for developing countries.

Conversely, the benefits of student migration for developed countries have been described in terms of 'brain gain'. A significant number of those who migrate as students stay on and work as skilled professionals. For example, in 1999 in the US, 26 percent of resident doctoral degree holders in science and engineering, 15 percent of MA and 11 percent of Bachelors students were foreign-born and US-trained. (Skeldon, 1997).

More recently, however, the tendency to see the emigration of students and skilled professionals as necessarily positive for the receiving country and negative for the development of the sending country has been challenged. It is now generally recognized that student migration, for instance, does not necessarily constitute a loss for the sending country. For example, in the context of the expanding East Asian economies, the large numbers of students going to the US, Canada, Europe and Australia has led, in turn, to large numbers of skilled returnees who have contributed significantly to the region's continued economic development. As the World Migration Report (2005: 304) notes, 'the future well-being of nations depends on their ability...to compete in the global, knowledge-based economy' and competitiveness is no longer tied to physical capital and raw material, but relies on the human capital associated with creativity and innovation'.

The process of student migration can play a key role in this regard, allowing people to return with enhanced knowledge and skills. This process and the continuing intellectual links between home and host countries it brings, has been described in terms of 'brain circulation' (Siddiqui, 2002; 2004).

As noted above, the developmental impact of student migration from Bangladesh to the UK is not the main subject of this study. Nevertheless, these theoretical models are worth bearing in mind for the discussion that follows. Firstly, they illustrate the tendency to categorize student migration as a type of highly skilled migration from developing to developed countries, which takes place in line with the demands of the international labour market. This study will question this assumption by examining the diverse backgrounds of student migrants, as well as the relationship that student migration has with unskilled labour migration. In addition, the discussions of 'brain drain' and 'brain gain', or even 'brain circulation' reveal a tendency to view student migration as a homogeneous category driven by the same motivating factors and with a uniform impact. By exploring the diverse motives for, categories of, routes to and outcomes of student migration, this study will question whether any of these models is adequate.

In addition to its position within the brain drain debate, international student mobility has also been discussed in the context of globalization and the increasing mobility of goods, services, people, knowledge and culture associated with it. The growing numbers of Bangladeshis going to study abroad, to both the UK and other destinations, can be seen as both a result of and constitutive of such globalizing processes. Seeing student migration in this context leads to a consideration of how it is linked to factors such as enhanced global communications, the outside cultural influences affecting Bangladeshis, particularly the younger generation, access to information on overseas opportunities, the availability of the Internet and the expanding international market in higher education.

Within this vast body of literature on globalization, much has been written on how migration is leading to the construction of transnational identities, transnational social networks or even transnational economic classes. The concept of transnationalism has also entered discussions of international student migration; for example, Zelinsky and Lee (1998) have described it as a key mechanism through which the intellectually most vital elements of a country's future elite form heterolocal social networks that will be part of the ongoing de-coupling of residence and citizenship. Others have described student migration with reference to the experiential goals of youth mobility cultures, for which transnational experience becomes a form of capital. While this report does not seek to draw firm conclusions on these issues, the findings of primary research do have implications regarding social class and the importance of social networks, which invite a reconsideration of such issues.

## **Methodology**

This study has been based on a combination of primary and secondary research. Academic literature on student migration provided some theoretical models and a broader context for understanding international student migration. Recent press coverage of the topic in Britain and Bangladesh was also examined. Statistical information was gathered from a range of sources in order to understand the current patterns and trends of international student migration from

Bangladesh, as well as the subjects, courses, institutions and regions most sought after by Bangladeshi students in the UK. This included statistics from UNESCO, UCAS and the British High Commission.

A survey was conducted of the sources of information available to Bangladeshi students regarding applying for UK study. This included browsing internet websites, collecting available written materials from different sources and conducting interviews with individuals involved in counseling students for overseas study, such as the British Council and London Metropolitan University's Bangladesh Liaison Office. Two education fairs were attended: the Australian Education Fair organized by IDP agency and the UK Education Fair organized by the British Council. This provided an opportunity to look at the marketing of foreign education in Bangladesh and the relationship between overseas colleges and universities and the local agents representing them.

In one workshop and a series of private interviews, returned UK students were asked about which sources of information they had used and how accessible information had been. These discussions were also used to gather information on other issues, such as motivations for studying in the UK, problems faced in the application process and experiences of UK study.

A series of interviews were held with the different actors involved in the process of student migration from Bangladesh to the UK. These included interviews with representatives from the British Council, UK universities, private counseling agencies and the British High Commission. Several hours were also spent shadowing an Entry Clearance Officer in the British High Commission, in which current student visa applications were examined and discussed.

An investigation was conducted into the role and practices of overseas education counseling agencies. In addition to information gathered from interviews and discussions, a number of agents in Gulshan and Banani were approached with a Bangladeshi (an ex-agency owner himself) posing as a prospective student. An advertisement was placed in the *Daily Star* newspaper for agencies to advertise on a new RMMRU website and another advertisement was placed in local private colleges requesting students to share their experiences with overseas study counseling agencies. Agencies' advertising was examined through a newspaper survey of the *Daily Star* and a survey of other advertising materials, such as posters, billboards, flyers, information sheets and websites.

On 4 May 2006, a dialogue was held in the British Council Auditorium, in which the preliminary findings of this research were presented. This was attended by 150 participants, including representatives from the British Council, British High Commission, government functionaries and students. Their comments and insights have been incorporated in this final report. A list of these participants is in Annex 3.

## **Structure of Report**

Section 1 provides some useful background information on student migration from Bangladesh to the UK. It first outlines some of the key motivations for Bangladeshis to study in the UK, then describes current trends of student migration from Bangladesh based on available statistical data. It looks at the current pattern of student migration from Bangladesh to different destination countries, the courses and subjects studied by Bangladeshis in the UK, and recent UK student visa application figures.

Section 2 then looks at the actual process through which student migration from Bangladesh to the UK takes place and the role of the different actors involved in this, including the British Council, British High Commission and overseas study counseling agencies. From the perspective of students, it describes what information is available to them, what options they have, what requirements they must meet and what steps they must take in order to apply for UK study.

Section 3 provides an evaluation of the current process of student migration from Bangladesh to the UK. Drawing on primary research, it identifies key problems and weaknesses in the current system. In particular, it evaluates students' ability to access information independently and looks in detail at the role of overseas education counseling agencies, uncovering a range of deceptive and fraudulent practices. The existence of bogus UK colleges in facilitating entry of labour migrants is also highlighted. This section includes the perspectives of returned and prospective students and different actors involved in the student migration process. Having evaluated the current process for managing student migration, this chapter assesses the implications of the new points system for student migration.

Section 4 draws some conclusions from research findings and makes some specific policy recommendations for what steps could be taken in Bangladesh and in the UK in order to improve the system for managing student migration.

## **SECTION 2: MOTIVATIONS, PATTERNS AND TRENDS**

The following section first outlines the motivations for Bangladeshis to study in the UK, then identifies current patterns and trends in this migration, drawing on a range of statistical data. It looks at the most popular destinations for Bangladeshi students, the number of successful and failed UK student visa applications over the last 5 years and the profile of applicants in terms of subject, gender and place of residence. These trends and patterns of student migration from Bangladesh to the UK are discussed in the context of broader changes, such as the migration policies of different receiving countries.

### **Motivations for Studying in the UK**

This study uncovered a variety of motivations for studying in the UK. In order to explore these, firstly, a workshop was held with 7 Bangladeshis who had previously studied or were currently studying in the UK. These were mainly high-achievers who had studied or were studying at MA or PhD level in various fields. Secondly, a series of private interviews and discussions were conducted with a broader range of students, both prospective and returned. Some of these were structured interviews based on pre-prepared questions, while others were brief discussions held at education fairs, social occasions or on public transport. The views of agency representatives, university representatives and other interviewees about this question were also noted.

One major motive for studying in the UK that emerged from discussions is the higher status accorded to a qualification from the UK compared to one from a Bangladeshi university. Studying in the UK is viewed both as a way of enhancing future job opportunities in Bangladesh and as a potential route towards working abroad in the future. In particular, a foreign degree of UK status is

seen as a necessity for Bangladeshis to gain access to the international job market. This was a factor stressed mainly by the higher-achieving and ambitious students already pursuing postgraduate studies in the UK. These students generally had a realistic idea of the opportunities that would be open to them on completion of their studies and many of them had clear career goals. However, even for lower-grade students who did not have specific career goals, the desire to work temporarily or settle permanently in the UK on completion of studies ranked high among the motivations for going there. Research suggested that a significant number of Bangladeshis applying for UK study intended to work on arrival, an issue which is discussed in detail below.

For many Bangladeshis, then, student migration to the UK is seen as a route to short term or long term labour migration, either regular or irregular, and either highly-skilled or unskilled. This points to the possible limitations of considering student migration separately from labour migration, a distinction which reflects the immigration policies of receiving countries, but does not capture the interrelated nature of the two categories.

As well as enhancing job prospects, studying in the UK also increases social status within Bangladesh. For example, a foreign education enhances a person's marriage prospects and sending children to study in the UK increases a family's social standing in Bangladesh. This is not only due to the future prospects UK study may bring, but also reflects the social capital associated with going overseas in Bangladesh. This supports discussions of transnationalism as a form of capital.

As well as status, the perceived quality of UK education was also an important motivation for Bangladeshis. Again, this was most important for high-achievers; participants in the workshop saw studying in the UK as an opportunity to gain world-class exposure to a particular field of studies. This included the possibility of making contact with leading academics in the field, as well as other students from all over the world.

When considering why Bangladeshis choose the UK over other European countries, it is important to bear in mind the historical link between the two countries. Given Bangladesh's status as an ex-British colony, it is unsurprising that Bangladeshis know far more about the UK than any other European country. This is not least because the nature and content of education in Bangladesh has been historically shaped by the British. The existence of an English medium education sector and the fact that this is the second language in Bangladesh are clearly important. Furthermore, given the close relationship between power and knowledge under colonialism and the Western-style education of many of the colonial elite, it is unsurprising that a British education continues to be associated with power and prestige.

The history of migration from Bangladesh to the UK and the existence of a large British Bangladeshi diaspora community is also significant, as it makes the UK appear a less alien destination. A number of people interviewed had relatives already living in the UK who could provide support and/or accommodation. One woman interviewed had had an arranged marriage with a Bangladeshi who was a long term UK resident and had begun studying once in the UK.

Students were also attracted by the multiculturalism of British society more generally, which made integration seem easier than in some other countries. It also emerged from discussions that many people in Bangladesh associate going abroad, and Western culture in particular, with greater

personal freedom. For the younger generation in Bangladesh especially, television, Internet and other modern media are important channels through which images of Western culture are shaped. Increasingly, young people are influenced and feel connected with global culture (particularly from the West) and the desire to go abroad is seen as a way of gaining first hand access to this. Other advantages of living in the UK mentioned were the travel possibilities within the EU and the relatively high wages for casual labour.

The above factors highlight the importance of both individual country contexts and broader changes associated with globalization for understanding international student migration.

### **Pattern of Student Migration from Bangladesh**

This section describes the current patterns and trends regarding student migration from Bangladesh to the UK. A number of sources provide useful data on this, although this information is somewhat patchy. Firstly, the British High Commission in Bangladesh provided figures on student visa applications, both successful and unsuccessful for the last 5 years (Table 1). In addition, a sample of accepted and rejected applications was examined to collect information on residence of candidates, subject and level applied for and reasons for rejection (Table 2). UNESCO has data on international student migration by sending country and destination country, which also proved useful (Fig.1). In addition, the UK's University and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) website provides the figures for Bangladeshi students studying in the UK in 2005 by subject and course type (Fig. 4).

#### *Destinations for Bangladeshi Students*

Figure 1 shows the most common destinations for Bangladeshi students from 1999 to 2004. Although there are gaps in the data and it does not cover the last two years, it is useful for this study as it allows student migration from Bangladesh to the UK to be compared to other receiving countries and shows some interesting trends.

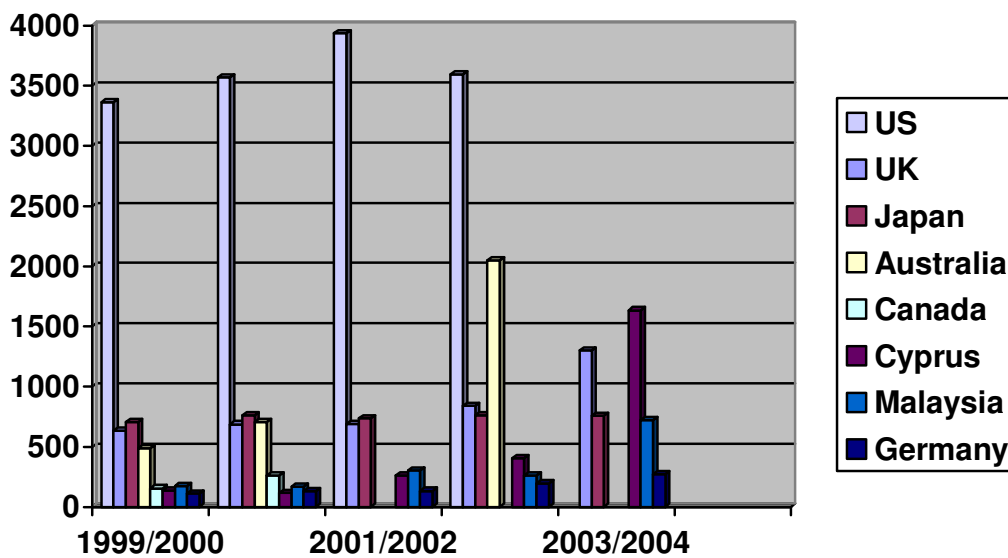
According to these statistics, the most popular study destinations for Bangladeshis in 2003/4 appear to be, in descending order, the US, Australia, Cyprus, UK, Japan and Malaysia (although the position of the US and Australia must be estimated from previous years). These figures point to a general rise in the number of Bangladeshi students going abroad to study, both to the UK and to other destinations. In the case of the UK, the number of Bangladeshi students almost doubled in this period, rising from 634 to 1,300. The number going to the US, Australia, Canada, Cyprus, Japan and Malaysia and Germany also rose.

In fact, the increasing number of Bangladeshi students studying abroad reflects a more general growth of student migration from other Asian countries. For example, in 2002-3 the number of students migration from Asia grew rapidly: India 74,603 (11.6%), China 64,757 (2%), South Korea 51,519 (5%), and Hong Kong 8,076 (4%) (World Migration Report, 2005).

It is interesting to note the shifting pattern of distribution between these different destination countries. One observation is that the US appears to be losing its lead as a receiving country for Bangladeshi students. In 1998/9 the number of Bangladeshis going to study in the US was 3,360, far superseding the figure for any other country. However, in 2002/3 the number of Bangladeshis

going to the US fell, even though it was rising for other countries.<sup>1</sup> However, discussions suggested that it is now much more difficult to get a US visa. The most obvious explanation for the fall in students going to Bangladesh in 2002/3 is the impact of 9/11, which has made it increasingly difficult to obtain a US student visa, particularly for South Asian males. It is interesting to note that 2001/2-2002/3 also saw the steepest rise in Bangladeshi students going to the UK (from 839 students to 1,300 students) and Australia (from 703 to 2,049), which suggests that these countries are gaining students due to the restrictive visa policy of the US.

**Fig. 1: Destinations for Bangladeshi Students (Source: UNESCO)<sup>2</sup>**



Another trend revealed by this data is the emergence of Australia as a growing study destination for Bangladeshis, emerging also as a major competitor to the UK. The number of Bangladeshi students going to Australia had soared from 490 to 2,049 in this six-year period, overtaking the UK as a receiving country for Bangladeshi students. One reason for Australia's popularity as a destination is that current immigration rules permit students to remain in the country and work on completion of studies. IDP agency, which represents all major universities, has also played a crucial role in promoting Australian education in Bangladesh.

Australia is not the only destination that is gaining popularity. Statistics also point to a dramatic rise in Bangladeshis going to Cyprus. This figure climbed from a mere 118 in 1999/2000 to 263 in

<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately the latest figures for the US are unavailable and the American Embassy will not provide any figures on visa applications

<sup>2</sup> Prepared on the basis of UNESCO's data on student migration by country of origin and destination, available from <http://stats.uis.unesco.org/Tableviewer/tableView.aspx?ReportId=84>

2000/1, 406 in 2001/2, then rose to a towering 1,633 in 2002/3. In fact, UNESCO data show that this trend is a reflection of the increase in the total number of Asian students going to Cyprus, although the rise is particularly steep for Bangladeshis. This can be attributed partly to the status of Cyprus as an entry point to other European Union countries, including the UK. In fact, this study found that studying in Cyprus is being marketed by some agencies on the basis of its potential for transfer to colleges in the UK and other European destinations. Discussions with Bangladeshis also suggested that Cyprus is being seen as a gateway to Europe.

Two other destinations of growing importance for Bangladeshi students are Canada and Malaysia. Unfortunately, while the latest figures for Canada are not available in this dataset, other research suggested this is a growing market for Bangladeshi students. The number of Bangladeshi students going to Malaysia has climbed from 174 to 743 between 1998 and 2003. Many overseas education agencies in Bangladesh are also marketing Malaysia as a study destination for Bangladeshis. The emergence of Malaysia as a market for overseas education can be attributed to the appearance of numerous colleges affiliated to the US, UK and Australian universities and offering degrees in their name. Newspaper advertisements for Malaysian colleges advertise degrees from universities in all three of these countries. For Bangladeshis, this provides the opportunity to obtain a certificate from from a well-reputed country, while benefiting from the cheaper tuition fees and living costs of Malaysia. This is one clear example of the outsourcing of higher education, a trend which seems likely to increase in the future.

Throughout the period shown, Japan has remained a popular destination for Bangladeshi students. The number has remained more or less stable during this period, only rising from 706 to 757, although relative to other countries Japan has fallen from second position to fifth position.

**Table 1: UK Student Visa Applications and Issues 2001-05<sup>3</sup>**

	Total applications received	%age diff in total applications year on year	Student applications received	% diff in student applications year on year	Student issues	Student refusals	%age Student issues
2001	27824	-	2482	-	1311	1171	52.8%
2002	23810	-14.4%	3900	57.1%	2176	2080	51.1%
2003	37512	57.5%	5104	30.9%	2374	2617	47.6%
2004	44594	18.9%	6702	31.3%	1926	3663	34.5%
2005	37932	-14.9%	6944	3.6%	2857	4766	37.5%

**Table 2: UK Student Visa Applications and Issues Jan-Apr 2006**

	Student applications received	Student Issues	Student Refusals	% Applications successful
Jan	667	219	560	32.8%
Feb	506	170	472	33.6%
Mar	616	152	434	24.7%
April	603	139	542	23%

<sup>3</sup> This data was obtained directly from the Visa Section of the British High Commission of Bangladesh

Table 1 shows the total number of visa applications received, the number of applications for student visa and the number of student visas issued by the British High Commission in the last 5 years. As these figures reveal, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of student visa applications. In fact, applications have almost tripled during this period, rising from 2482 in 2001 to 6944 in 2005. While the number of applicants has risen every year, by far the sharpest increase was from 2001 to 2002, when applications rose by a staggering 57.1 percent. For the following two years, applicant numbers rose by around 30 percent, although the figure remained fairly stable from 2004 to 2005, rising by only 3.6 percent.

The sharp increase in applicants in 2002 can be attributed partly to the impact of 9/11, which, as noted above, made it significantly more difficult for Bangladeshis to obtain a student visa for the US, the most popular destination for Bangladeshi students. Unfortunately, it is not possible to compare the figures for US student visa applications as the US Embassy will not disclose any information regarding visas.

In terms of student visas issued by the British High Commission, the number has more than doubled in the last 5 years, from 1311 in 2001 to 2857 in 2005. This has been a steady rise, with the exception of 2004, when the number of visas issued fell slightly. However, the increase in student visas issued does not keep pace with the rise in student visa applications received by the British High Commission. In other words, the success rate of applications for student visa has fallen during this period, from 52.8 percent in 2001 to only 37.5 percent in 2005. Only in 2005 did the success rate of applications increase by 3 percent. It is also noteworthy that the number of student visas issued in 2002 increased from 1311 to 2176, almost keeping pace with the steep rise in applications. This seems to support the claim of some interviewed that the UK was willing to admit more students after 9/11 following the US tightening its migration policies.

The application figures for January to April 2006 (shown in Table 2) show that the number of applicants has continued to rise steadily in recent months. The average number of applications per month for 2005 was 578.7, but so far in 2006 the average per month is 597. Based on this figure, we could estimate a yearly total of 7167, although the fact that applications are still rising suggests it will be more than this. While the number of applicants has been higher this year, the success rate has continued to fall steadily, with the exception of February, which saw a sharp drop in applications from the previous month. In the last two months recorded, March and April, less than one quarter of applicants for student visa have been successful. This contrasts with the figures for 2001-3 when the success rate hovered around 50 percent.

### *Profile of Applicants*

A sample analysis of 32 successful and 38 failed student visa applications was conducted in order to give an idea of the profile of applicants in terms of location, chosen course, gender, educational background and, in the case of failed applicants, reasons for failure<sup>4</sup> (see Table 2). This sample was selected at random and all applications were submitted between 2004 and 2006.

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<sup>4</sup> This information was compiled with the help of staff of the British High Commission in Bangladesh

In terms of geographical location in Bangladesh, out of the total of 70 applicants, 29 were residing in Dhaka at the time of application. However, this sample does not show place of origin and many of these may have come to Dhaka from other districts for work or study. The second most common places of residence for this sample were Chittagong and Sylhet, which both had 9 applicants. Other places of residence were Manikganj, Moulvibazar, Narayanganj, Comila, Noakhali, Habiganj, Mymensingh, Gazipur and Kulna, although each had only had 1 or 2 applicants. Interestingly, a higher proportion of the unsuccessful applicants were from Dhaka; 17 out of 38, as opposed to 12 out of the 32 successful applicants.

In terms of educational background, most successful applicants (23 out of 32) had a Bachelor's degree, four had a Master's degree, two had A-levels, 2 HSC and one a diploma. Qualifications were lower for unsuccessful applicants: of 38 applicants, 5 had Master's level qualifications, 14 had a Bachelor's degree, 10 had HSC and 3 had diplomas.

There is a clear gender imbalance in the students applying for UK student visas in this sample. Of the total 70 applicants, only 3 were female, of which 2 were successful. These 3 female students had applied for Law, MBA and MA international Business (the last of which was unsuccessful).

### *Subjects Studied*

Of the successful applicants in the sample, the most common course applied for was MBA. In fact, out of the 32 applicants, 20 had chosen a business-related course, such as Business Administration, Business Studies, Business IT or International Business. Three were applying for Law, three for Accounting and one each for Computer Science and Information Systems. Of the failed applicants, MBA was again the most popular course: 10 applicants out of the total 38, while 4 had applied for BBA. Four applications were for Law, 2 for Accounting and 11 were for IT-related subjects, such as IT, Computing and Computing and Information Systems. Other subjects applied for were Travel with Tourism, Marketing Management, Sociocultural Anthropology and Hospitality and Management.

Further data on subjects and courses applied for by Bangladeshi students was obtained from the UK's University and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS). The most popular subject groups that Bangladeshis applied for in 2005 were, in descending order, Business Administration, Engineering, Law, Mathematics/Computer Science, Medicine and Dentistry and Sciences combined with Social Sciences. The highest number of students accepted was 62 for Engineering, followed by 53 for Business Administration, 50 for Law and 39 for Maths/Computer Science. This data reveals the popularity of Business Studies and related subjects for Bangladeshis and a clear bias towards technical and science subjects as opposed to Social Sciences or Arts.

Having observed some of the current trends in student migration from Bangladesh to the UK, the following section will look in detail at the process through which this migration takes place.

### **SECTION 3: DESCRIPTION OF STUDENT MIGRATION PROCESS**

The following section describes the process of applying for study in the UK and the role of the various actors involved in this: the British High Commission, British Council and overseas education counseling agencies. In particular, it describes this process from the perspective of Bangladeshis wishing to study in the UK, examining what information is available to them and what are the necessary steps they must take in order to apply.

Figure 1 illustrates the process of applying for study in the UK and the various stages involved in this. The three main steps, finding information, applying for study and applying for student visa, are described in more detail below.

#### **Step 1: Finding Information on UK Study**

Information on both study options and the application process is available at no cost from various sources. Accessing this information is the first important step that Bangladeshis must take towards applying for UK study, therefore forms a crucial part of the student migration process. The following section summarizes the main sources of information available to prospective UK students in Bangladesh.

##### *Role of the British Council*

Firstly, the British Council can provide students with a wealth of information regarding studying in the UK, including information on the range of courses and institutions on offer, entrance requirements, funding options, the application process, obtaining a UK student visa and the experience of living and studying in the UK. Promoting UK education overseas comes within the British Council's broader mandate 'to build mutually beneficial relationships between people in the UK and other countries and to increase appreciation of the UK's creative ideas and achievements'.<sup>5</sup>

This information can be accessed either through the British Council's Education UK website or from one of their centres, which are located in Dhaka, Chittagong and Sylhet. These centres include libraries, self-access centres and a counseling service, which are all freely available to students. The British Council receives 30,000 enquiries per year, although this includes repeat enquiries. They also run seminars in English and Bangla on how to apply for UK study and others designed to prepare students for the experience of living and studying in the UK, and organize Education Fairs in collaboration with UK colleges and universities. The British Council promote their services through newspaper advertisements, mainly in the Bangla press, through distributing posters and banners and by marketing UK education in schools, colleges and universities.

Students can make their application through the British Council's Professional Advisory Student Service (PASS) service. For a fee of 120 GBP, a representative is assigned to guide each student through the entire application process, helping them to compile all the necessary documents for university and student visa applications. This service includes thorough checks on all documentation. Applications for student visa made through PASS stand a much higher chance of

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.britishcouncil.org/home-about-us-purpose-and-values.htm>

success with the British High Commission, who reported a 100 percent success rate of British Council applicants for the last year.

#### *Other Sources of Information*

Information about individual colleges or universities can be obtained from college and university websites. Almost all universities now have an online prospectus. This normally includes detailed information on all aspects of study, for example, courses offered, entrance requirements, teaching methods, assessment criteria, application procedures, funding options, accommodation, student support services, the Students Union and student life. Additional information can be obtained by contacting admissions offices or specific departments. More detailed information on course content, such as module descriptions and reading lists can be obtained by contacting the relevant Departmental Office or Course Convener. Websites also include profiles of members of staff and their research interests, which will be of particular interest to students applying for DPhil or PhD programmes.

London Metropolitan University has a regional office in Dhaka located in the Sonargon Hotel, Dhaka. This office is funded directly by the university and provides free counseling on a range of issues, such as study and career options, the application process, entrance requirements, funding and student visa applications. This office also responds to local email queries, supplies and processes London Metropolitan application forms and issues offer letters. The decision to set up a regional office was made partly due to the high intake of Bangladeshi students. The highest number of student visas issued in Bangladesh are to London Metropolitan students, partly due to the close working relationship it enjoys with the British High Commission and the British Council.

A number of websites provide useful information on studying in the UK, aside from the British Council's website. UKCOSA, the website for the Council of International Education, provides information on financing study, student visas, working in the UK, accommodation, application processes etc. The Higher Education and Research Opportunities (HERO) website provides information on UK Universities, colleges and research organizations, including a list of university and college websites. Prospects, the UK's official graduate careers website has a section on postgraduate courses and research. For information on the quality of UK educational institutions, students can look at the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) website, which reviews standards of higher education institutes in the UK. This provides reports on specific higher education institutes, which can be downloaded. These reports look at the quality of teaching of each subject, the student's learning experience and the support and guidance available to students.

Information on UK student visa applications can be obtained from the website of the British High Commission of Bangladesh, who are responsible for processing student visa applications. The UK Home office's website also has information on this and advice on student visas is provided by the Immigration Advisory Service (IAS).

As well as the above mentioned resources, this study found that information on UK study is often obtained from friends and family, particularly when students have contacts already studying or living abroad. In particular, these contacts are consulted about the quality of different institutions, accommodation options, work opportunities and the application process.

### *Advertising for UK Study*

The extent of advertising for overseas study in Bangladesh is staggering and the UK figures largely within this. Although this advertising includes Education Fairs, university recruitment events and the British Council's promotional work, the vast majority of it is done by private counseling agencies. In some cases, this promotion is for specific UK institutions and in other cases it is for UK study in general. This advertising takes the form of billboards, posters, flyers, websites, as well as college and university promotional materials, which may be supplied by UK colleges or developed by the agency. Advertising can be found not only all over Dhaka but also outside the capital, including in rural areas. Attractive newspaper advertisements for UK study can be found in both the Bangla and English press. For example, the *Daily Star* newspaper prints an average of two or three of such advertisements every day.

It is important to bear in mind that the extent and reach of advertising by private agencies in Bangladesh far outweighs the British Council's efforts. While students from a privileged background already have some idea of the formal application process and know where to access information independently, many students have little idea about other sources and going to an agency might appear as the only way to secure a chance to study in the UK.

### **Step 2: Applying for Study**

Having selected a course of study, an application must be made by the student to the college or university, either through the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), direct to the college, through the British Council's PASS service or through an overseas study counseling agency. If accepted, the student will receive an official offer letter guaranteeing them a place on their chosen program of study, which will then form part of their student visa application.

#### *Applying through UCAS*

Students applying for undergraduate study in the UK can apply through the UK's Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), the central organization that processes applications for full-time undergraduate courses at UK universities and colleges. The UCAS scheme covers over 50,000 different programmes of study at 325 member institutions. These include over 170 Further Education Colleges who provide higher education study opportunities at Higher National Diploma/Certificate (HND/C) or first degree level, as well as a wide range of other courses, either academic or vocational. The UCAS system allows students to apply for courses at up to six different institutions on one form, which must be listed in order of preference. The application process can be conducted electronically from initial research and application through to tracking progress and receiving decisions online.

#### *Direct Applications*

For Foundation, Master's, PhD or MBA courses, applications must be made directly to the university or college. Application forms are available online from the college or university website or by post and require students to give details of previous academic study, their proposed course of study, sources of funding and a short personal statement. Application forms must be submitted to

the university or college together with grade transcripts of previous study, English Language certificates and any other supporting documentation. Some universities ask for an application fee of around 20 GBP to cover administrative costs.

As mentioned above, students can also make their university application through the British Council's PASS service, which provides help in compiling and checking documents and submitting them to the university. In the case of London Metropolitan University, applications can be processed by their regional offices in Dhaka, who will also issue students with offer letters. Applications to colleges or universities can also be made with the help of overseas study counseling services, who submit them to the college or university on the student's behalf and then obtains an offer letter for successful applicants. The role of these agencies is outlined below.

### *Entrance Requirements*

Entrance requirements vary and can include academic and professional qualifications or, in some cases, specified work experience. The basic requirements for undergraduate courses are either five subject passes (two GCE A Level and 3 GCSE at grade C minimum), four subject passes (3 GCE A Levels and 1 GCSE at grade C minimum) or equivalent UK or overseas qualifications. Alternatively, students who have completed HSC can take a one-year Foundation course to gain entrance to a UK undergraduate course.

English Language qualifications required are as follows: to apply for Foundation courses, students usually need an IELTS score of 4.5 or equivalent, although this may be higher in some cases. For undergraduate courses, most universities require an IELTS score of 6 or above. As an alternative to IELTS, most universities will accept Cambridge Proficiency of English, Cambridge Advanced English Grade, or Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or equivalent level. However, individual colleges may have lower requirements or may give the option of completing an intensive English course on arrival.

### *Funding Options*

In order to obtain a student visa, students must show they can pay for their course and support themselves for the duration of their studies. The majority do so by finding a sponsor either in Bangladesh or in the UK. This does not necessarily have to be a parent or relative, but close relatives are more likely to be accepted by the British High Commission as a credible and reliable source of funding. A significant number of students interviewed had used a sponsor who was already resident in the UK. As discussed below, proving ability to fund UK study presents the major obstacle for most Bangladeshis wishing to apply.

There are several scholarships which Bangladeshis can apply for to study in the UK. The Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan funds postgraduate study for students from a Commonwealth country wishing to study in another Commonwealth country. Financial assistance includes all academic fees, a books and apparatus allowance, travel costs to and from the UK, approved travel for study and a personal allowance. The Plan funds most courses at Masters and PhD level for any subject and some undergraduate courses if they are not available in Bangladesh. To apply for this scholarship, students must have at least an upper second class degree obtained within the last ten years, and an IELTS score of 6.5 or higher. The application process is initiated

by the Ministry of Education through advertisements in the daily newspapers, and candidates are selected by the University Grants Commission.

Second, Bangladeshi Masters students can apply for the Chevening Scholarship Programme, which funds international postgraduate students who want to study in the UK. This award is funded by the UK's Foreign and Commonwealth Office and administered by the British Council. Funding is for one year of postgraduate study and includes a gratis student visa, all academic fees, a monthly allowance to cover living expenses, an arrival allowance for travel expenses, a thesis allowance and travel costs to and from the UK. Scholarships are intended for students who may play a leading role in their country's future and applicants selected are normally students of economics, law, human rights, governance, public administration, international relations, diplomatic training and environmental studies. Applicants must be 35 or younger and resident in Bangladesh. They must have an upper second class degree or higher, an IELTS score of 7 or above and a minimum of two to three years' working experience in their field. In addition, they must provide evidence that they will become a leader in their field and show how their studies will allow them to contribute to Bangladesh's socio-economic development in the future.

A few other funding options exist for Bangladeshis to study particular subjects in the UK. The Hornby Trust offers funding to support teachers to study in the UK in order to improve their English teaching skills. This scholarship is only awarded to selected groups of countries each year. Candidates for Hornby Trust awards will require a minimum IELTS score of 6.0.

The Bank of England offers an Educational Trust Fellowship for nationals working in the banking sector in developing countries, including Bangladesh, although the fellowships are not offered to each country every year. The fellowship is for one year, and is available for applicants working in the private commercial banking sector, with a minimum of 3-5 years of working experience. Candidates must have a first degree, an IELTS score of 6.0, and be prepared to return to work for their employer for at least one year after completing the fellowship.

The Cambridge Trust's OSI Chevening Cambridge Scholarships for Social Sciences and Humanities is also available for postgraduate students from Bangladesh. To be eligible, students must be aged between 23-35 years, have a degree equivalent to an upper second class degree from a UK university and intend to return to Bangladesh for work or study. Scholarships are for one academic year and cover academic fees, examination fees, a monthly stipend for living expenses (to be sufficient for a single student), and other agreed allowances including a return economy airfare.

Some UK universities and colleges provide their own scholarship schemes for overseas students, details of which can be found in prospectuses or on websites. In some cases, awards may be given for students that achieve high grades while studying in the UK. For example, London Metropolitan University has a system where BA students who obtain a grade of 65 or above in their first year will receive a discount of 2,000 GBP off their second year of studies.

### **Step 3: Applying for a Student Visa**

#### *Role of the British High Commission*

The British High Commission of Bangladesh is responsible for processing all applications for UK student visas. Applications must be made on IM2A forms available from the British High Commission and must be submitted to the Visa Facilitation Service (VFS), whose offices are located in Dhaka and Sylhet. A fee of Taka 450 is charged per application.

The official requirements for student visas are that students must intend to study on a full-time course involving at least 15 hours of organized daytime study each week, be able to pay for the course and support themselves for the duration of study and intend to return to Bangladesh. Documents required include: valid passport, 2 recent passport photos, visa fee (non-refundable), relevant diplomas and educational certificates, offer letter from a university, college or school, sponsorship declaration, sponsor's bank statements for the last 6 months, documents proving sponsor's source of income, tax clearance documents for sponsor and evidence of English Language Competency.

The decision on whether to grant a student visa is made by an Entry Clearance Officer (ECO). Although the British High Commission formerly used to interview all students, since 2004 most decisions have been taken based on documentation without interview. Currently, decisions rely on a subjective assessment of a student's credibility and intentions based on the full range of information available. However, decision-making is likely to become more structured under the new points-based system, as discussed below. Because of the high number of forgeries, ECOs make careful checks of documentation, although the high quality of some forgeries means it is not always possible to spot them.

As noted above, the success rate for student visa applications in 2005 was 37.5 percent. Of the sample of 38 refused applications, 10 were recorded as having submitted forged documents as part of their application. Other reasons stated for rejection related to 'ability and intention' and 'maintenance'. This could relate, for example, to the students intention to complete the course applied for on arrival in the UK, their ability to pay for this course and living expenses or their intention to return to Bangladesh on completion of the course. However, it is not entirely clear from the table which applicants had been rejected on these grounds.

#### *Role of Overseas Study Counseling Agencies*

As an alternative to applying independently for study and for student visa, many Bangladeshis apply for UK study through private overseas study counseling agencies. A multitude of these agencies has sprung up over recent years in response to the growing market for overseas education in Bangladesh. The majority of them are in Dhaka, concentrated in the wealthier areas of Bonani, Gulshan and Danmondi, although they can also be found in other parts of the city and in other areas such as Sylhet town.

As noted above, the number of these agents in Bangladesh and the extent of their advertising is staggering; it is difficult to walk 100 yards in Dhaka or to open a newspaper without seeing an advertisement for overseas study, often to the UK. Agencies tend to deal with migration to a

number of destination countries, such as Australia, the United States, Canada, Malaysia, although some deal exclusively with the UK. They usually represent a number of UK colleges or university, who provide them with funding. Agents work on a commission basis, usually receiving around 10 percent of fees for every student who takes up a place at a college or university. Conversely, many UK colleges work with a number of different agents in Bangladesh.

Agents provide initial counseling on study options and provide promotional materials on the institutions they represent, which may be supplied by the college or university or be designed by the agency. These promotional materials can be either in English or in Bangla and can usually be obtained free of charge. As well as providing information, agencies will manage the entire application process, assisting students to complete application forms, obtaining university or college offer letters and helping students to put together the documents required for student visa applications. Partly because of their advertising and partly because of the difficulties students face in navigating the application process independently, a large number of students apply through one of these agencies, although it is impossible to know the exact figures because the British High Commission does not know which applications are made through an agency. The role of these private agencies is described in more detail and evaluated below.

#### **SECTION 4: EVALUATION OF THE STUDENT MIGRATION PROCESS**

The above section has given a brief overview of the main sources of information and the formal process of applying for UK study. It has outlined the role of the British Council, British High Commission, University regional offices and private counseling agencies in this process. The following section will evaluate this process and the role of these different actors within it. In particular, it will examine how easily prospective students are able to navigate the process of applying for UK study, what problems they face and what other weaknesses exist in the current system.

##### **Access to Information**

As described above, accessing information on UK study constitutes the first crucial stage in the application process. As the last section described, a range of information sources are freely available to Bangladeshis wanting to study in the UK. Particularly helpful in this regard are the British Council's services and the websites of individual colleges and universities. However, as well as looking at what information is available, this study also examined to what extent Bangladeshis are able to access and understand this information. This was examined through the individual discussions and workshop, in which returned and prospective students were asked about where they obtained information on UK study, how easy this had been, what problems they had had and how they thought information could be made more accessible. In addition, those providing counseling to prospective students, including the British Council, London Metropolitan's Office and private agency representatives were asked about their experiences dealing with prospective students and these students' ability to access information independently. University representatives attending Education Fairs were also asked about how they dealt with queries from prospective overseas students.

These discussions revealed that the ability of Bangladeshis to access information on UK study varies a great deal. Some students interviewed had little trouble accessing the necessary

information independently, through university or college websites and prospectuses, from the British Council and from other sources listed above. This was particularly the case for high achieving students and those at postgraduate level. For example, those who participated in the workshop had found the information they required on the internet and had made contact with their faculty via email prior to applying. Many of them had other friends or family that had studied abroad who were able to give them some guidance on application procedures. Information had also been shared between friends applying at the same time. They had managed to obtain all the necessary information regarding student visas from the British High Commission and from friends who had already applied. From the perspective of these students, accessing information was not a major problem.

However, this study found that many Bangladeshi students are unaware of where to access information or lack the necessary English language or research skills to do so. Discussions with students hoping to study abroad revealed an ignorance of options, procedures or sources of information and a tendency to try to seek help from other people rather than accessing information independently. A number of returned students reported that they had faced problems accessing information on their own. Either they had not known where to look or had failed in their attempts; for example, two students had emailed universities to request information but received no response. Many students had relied on friends or family to get information about study options or the application process and this information was not always accurate. Individuals involved in counseling Bangladeshi students also reported that a great number of the students they dealt with were incapable of accessing information and going through the application process unassisted.

One finding of this research regarding students' ability to access information was the importance of social class. Generally, students from a wealthier background are likely to speak better English, already have friends and family studying abroad, are more familiar with using the Internet and are generally more confident about accessing or requesting information from different sources. The British Council referred to a marked difference in this regard between students of the English and Bangla medium sectors. In their experience, students of the English medium sector generally come from wealthy families, used the Internet, had been abroad and were generally well-informed about the process of applying for overseas study and the information resources available to them. On the other hand, students from the Bangla medium sector needed a lot of help in applying, and some of knew nothing at all about the process.

It could be noted that the ability to access information is just one aspect of the process for which social class is significant; for example, it is also the more privileged class who have the education and the financial resources to apply for overseas study, as well as boast a social network that includes people overseas. In this respect, student migration to the UK is an illustration of the relationship that exists between mobility and social class more generally. Yet, it is interesting to note that although social class does create barriers to student migration, it is by no means only those from a privileged background interested in applying or attempting to apply for UK study. In fact, many from middle income or even poorer families see studying abroad as a way to achieve social mobility. However, as noted above, many of these prospective applicants are less likely to access the information they need from the British Council or from the Internet and are more likely to seek help from an overseas study counseling agency. In fact, it is arguably the inability of many students to access information from other sources which explains the important role of these agencies in the student migration process, discussed in detail below.

Students' geographical location also impacts on their ability to access information. For students outside of Dhaka, particularly those in rural areas, getting information from the British Council or from the Internet is more difficult. There is also a lack of awareness that these resources exist, or that it is possible to apply for UK study independently. Most of the information regarding overseas study options comes through private counseling agencies, who advertise extensively in the press and can be found in many locations throughout Bangladesh. In this respect, it is not necessarily the case that people are unable or unwilling to use other resources to obtain information, even if accessing these may require effort or travel. It is simply that overseas agencies have reached far more Bangladeshis through their advertising than any other source, including the British Council. Clearly the British Council does not have the resources to penetrate all areas of Bangladesh and it is the lack of other sources of free and objective information which is a problem. In particular, universities, colleges and schools were found to provide inadequate information on overseas study. Few of them provide any counseling on this and teachers and other staff are often uninformed themselves.

It is not only lack of awareness or geographical access that stops many students using the British Council's services. This study also found that many students are reluctant to approach the British Council, often because they fear they will not meet official requirements and be immediately rejected, ruining their chances of applying for a student visa. This can be attributed to their reputation for doing thorough checks on students and closeness to the British High Commission. Of course, many of those students who avoid going to the British Council may be unable to meet academic, English or financial requirements and seeking an irregular route through the system. In this regard, the British Council's strict reputation acts as a way of filtering out non-genuine students and allowing them to assist genuine ones. However, in many cases, students are uninformed about what the specific requirements are and what steps they must take towards meeting them. Furthermore, students who are reluctant to approach the British Council for these reasons are not deterred from applying for UK study, but in many cases choose to seek help from another private agencies, often at considerable cost.

In the context of Bangladesh, there are also gender issues regarding decision-making and the negotiation of official processes, which may have a bearing on a student's application for UK study. From primary research, it appeared that not only are women far less likely to apply for UK study, but those who do are particularly likely to depend on others for help rather than seeking out information independently. For example, two women interviewed, one returned and one currently applying, had no idea about the application process and had husbands and other male relatives taking responsibility for managing their entire applications.

Even amongst students with good research skills, one major information gap concerns the reputation of different UK educational institutions. Research found that students were keen to get information on this, but did not know of any reliable sources and were forced to rely on family or friends for information. During her time in Bangladesh, this researcher was frequently asked by Bangladeshis about the reputation of UK universities and colleges, the majority of which were not well-known in the UK. This confusion can be attributed partly to the diversity of institutions who promote themselves in Bangladesh, which ranges from renowned UK universities to obscure third-rate colleges. To make things more confusing, low grade colleges often have names that sound

similar to well-known institutions. For example, 'Metropolitan University' and 'Westminster College' could easily be confused with London Metropolitan and Westminster University.

The Department for Educational Standards (DFES) accreditation system also has the potential to mislead students. Many low grade colleges advertise themselves as 'DFES accredited' and understandably, this is generally interpreted as a guarantee that certain standards are being met. However, the DFES does not make any such assurances regarding the quality of institutions on its register. In fact, registration can be completed online and the DFES website states, 'registration does not imply quality control and should not be used in marketing'. In other words, the DFES register is little more than a 'Yellow Pages' of UK education providers, although its name suggests otherwise. The need for a more effective accreditation system for private colleges in the UK is now recognized by all parties, including the Home Office, and there is some hope that this may be achieved within the new points-based system, as discussed below.

### **Meeting Financial Requirements**

In terms of the obstacles faced by Bangladeshi students applying for overseas study, the major difficulty for many is in meeting the financial requirements for obtaining a student visa. As mentioned above, students are required to prove their ability to pay for their studies and support themselves by providing documents including sponsor's bank statements for the last 6 months, bank solvency certificate and tax clearance documents, FDR receipts, documents proving sponsor's source of income. Most Bangladeshis interviewed thought that these requirements were too difficult to meet and less stringent criteria should be used. Many of those who had succeeded in meeting them had only been able to do so with the help of wealthy relatives transferring money. Those offering counseling to students admitted that very few Bangladeshis were able to meet financial requirements and many exaggerated the value of certain assets (for example, property owned by family members) in order to meet requirements. Even those in a financial position to support themselves or with a genuine sponsor may have trouble producing some documents, for example, tax clearance documents.

Clearly, students admitted to the UK must be able to support themselves for the duration of their studies and it is this which dictates financial requirements. The difficulty that Bangladeshis face in meeting these requirements is a reflection of the inequality between the two countries and these requirements cannot simply be relaxed because they are difficult to meet. However, it must be acknowledged that the more difficult it is to meet formal requirements, the more likely applicants are to look for an irregular route through the system. Therefore, when considering the high incidence of irregular practices and the tendency to seek help from counseling agencies, it is necessary to bear in mind the difficulty most Bangladeshis face in meeting the formal financial requirements. It is these irregular practices which will now be discussed.

## **Deceptive and Fraudulent Practices: Unscrupulous Counseling Agencies and Bogus UK Colleges**

The two problems discussed above, access to information from other sources and difficulty in meeting financial requirements, help to explain the popularity of overseas education counseling agencies in Bangladesh. In the latter case, students may go to agencies hoping that they will overcome legal obstacles by engaging in fraudulent practices on their behalf, as discussed below. However, there is also the perception, even for those who can meet requirements, that going to an agency provides the quickest route or best chance of getting through the system. This can be understood partly in the context of other official processes in Bangladesh, where people have little faith that following formal procedures will result in equal treatment or success, and seeking help from a personal contact or paying an intermediary is often the only way to succeed. This partly explains why, as one agency owner described, students tend to look for a 'quick fix' solution or 'short circuit method', rather than going through the proper process.

Agencies often fuel this perception by making claims such as 'We can make your path to university more straightforward and quicker than the conventional process' (Go Study agency). One agent at the UK Education Fair was observed informing students that the visa application process was extremely complicated and the British High Commission's policy constantly changing, therefore they stood little chance of compiling a successful application without this agent's help. In some cases, going to an agent does indeed speed up the process; for example, one student reported that he had gone to an agency after waiting months for a response from a university and they had got him an offer letter in two days.

As noted above, because of their success, overseas study counseling agencies have multiplied in number, been able to invest in extensive advertising and, consequently, have become the major channel through which UK education is promoted in Bangladesh and reach the greatest number of prospective students. In fact, the role of these agencies as promoters of UK education partly helps to explain the dramatic rise in student visa applications received by the British High Commission over recent years.

Given that many students require some help in applying for UK study and do not have access to other sources of information, private counseling agencies can potentially play a useful and important role in facilitating student migration to the UK. Most UK colleges and universities depend on agencies to recruit overseas students and a great many Bangladeshi students that come to the UK have received information from or applied through an agency.

However, many of the problems with the current student migration process in Bangladesh relate to the role of these counseling agencies. There is currently no framework for regulating them and although some are genuine, this study found that deceptive and fraudulent practices are widespread, which are outlined below.

The information below on the malpractices of agencies was gathered from a range of sources: discussions with students who had experience dealing with agencies, interviews with current or past agency workers or owners, discussions with ECOs at the British High Commission, articles in British and Bangladeshi newspapers and visits to a number of agencies in the Gulshan and Banani areas of Dhaka with a Bangladeshi posing as a prospective student.

### *i) Charging Fees*

As noted above, private counseling agencies are funded directly by the UK colleges and universities they represent, and receive a commission for every student that takes up a place. According to their agreement with universities, they are not supposed to charge students any fee for their services, as was verified by discussions with university representatives. However, this study found that in the vast majority of cases, agents do charge fees. Agency fees were found to vary depending on both the agency and the student's perceived ability to pay. For example, two students interviewed had paid respectively 50,000 and 70,000 taka to the same agency for the same service. In most cases, money would be required at various stages of the application process. Initial advice and information sheets from different institutions would be given at no cost, although in a few cases a minimal registration fee was charged. Often, 5,000-10,000 taka would be charged for a university offer letter, then a proportion of tuition fee may be taken, followed by an additional fee for visa processing; up to approximately 25,000 taka at well-known agencies. Examples were found of students paying anything from 15,000 to 50,000 taka. According to those interviewed, agency fees have risen considerably over the last decade. Many students interviewed assumed that paying such fees was an unavoidable part of applying for UK study and were unaware that applying to universities and receiving offer letters was in most cases free of charge.

### *ii) Conning Students Out of Money*

The study discovered that, in some cases, students who have paid large sums of money to agencies receive no further information and are effectively being conned by supposed counseling agencies. One agency owner described the process as follows: the agency takes Taka 10-20,000 in agency fees, then one or two months later, produces a false offer letter and asks for tuition fees of Taka 5,000-10,000, a proportion of which they would keep and a proportion of which would go to a UK college. In many cases, students would then be told nothing about their application for several months, until later they would be given some reason as to why their application was unsuccessful. In most cases, no receipt was given and students were not refunded their money.

Several students interviewed reported that they or someone they knew had had such an experience, although the amount of money lost varied. For example, one person had gone to an agency on the suggestion of a university representative at an Education Fair and subsequently lost Taka 7,500 in agency fees. Another person reported that, in 2004, many people had been conned by the same agency in Eastern Plaza, which after 6 months had closed their office and opened in another location under a different name. In yet another case, it was reported that a group of students went back to an agency to demand a refund of fees and received violent threats. Although it is clearly not all agencies that engage in such dishonest and exploitative practices, research suggested that many prospective students in Bangladesh were having similar experiences.

### *iii) Fraudulent Practices*

This study found that there is a high incidence of fraudulence at various stages of the process of applying for study in the UK. It should be emphasized that this does not necessarily involve overseas study counseling agencies; in some cases, applicants may provide inaccurate information or obtain forged documentation by their own devices. For example, as a recent article

in the *Daily Star* newspaper pointed out, producing certificates has become easy with the availability of high quality scanners, printers, papers and software and they can also be bought from many locations ('Forged Certificates Worry parents', 1 Feb 2006). However, it appears that in a great many cases, agencies are involved in fraudulent practices and it is often for this reason that applicants seek their help, often at a high cost. The following list is not exhaustive but covers what appear to be the most common malpractices.

Firstly, many applications for student visas are submitted with forged bank statements. It has already been noted that meeting financial requirements constitutes the major obstacle to most Bangladeshi applicants. Because of the obvious potential for forgeries, the amount of money in the account must also be verified by the bank manager, which is done via a phone call from an ECO in the British High Commission. As a way around this, a common practice of many agencies is to bribe a Bank Manager to answer the phone and verify the false information provided by forged bank statements.

The high incidence of forged bank statements was verified by ECOs at the British High Commission, who deal with these forgeries on a daily basis. ECOs also reported that in some cases, bank statements were genuine but did not belong to the sponsor named. Those connected with agencies or experienced in dealing with them also reported that supplying forged bank statements and bribing bank managers was common practice. This appeared to be common knowledge among others involved in student migration, with the exception of UK universities. Those interviewed claimed that these practices are possible in many banks in Bangladesh, although exceptions mentioned were HSBC, Standard Chartered and Dhaka Bank.

According to the British High Commission, students sometimes provide false information about their relationship with the person sponsoring them. Although there is no formal requirement that applicants must be sponsored by a relative, it is well-known that the British High Commission looks more favourably upon applicants sponsored by a close relative, who is deemed a more credible and reliable source of funding. According to one ECO, many applications falsely claim that their sponsor is an Uncle. Although it is generally impossible for the British High Commission to confirm or dispute, there have been cases which revealed that the said 'Uncle' bore no relationship to the applicant in question.

In other cases, a phone call to the sponsor revealed either ignorance of the applicant's course of study or college fees, or the sponsor has never heard of the applicant. In the latter case, applicants may be using the name of a wealthy person as their sponsor without their consent. In other cases, the sponsor may be a personal contact of the applicant, but the relationship claimed is untrue. Another scenario is that the sponsor is a person unknown to the applicant who is being bribed to fulfill the role of sponsor, which includes answering a phone call from the British High Commission. Information from students that had used agencies and people from agencies suggests that some agencies have a list of such people, who they pay to act as sponsors for applicants.

In addition to financial documents, other forged documents that may be supplied by agencies include offer letters, degree certificates or grade transcripts, English Language certificates and letters stating receipt of tuition fees. An ECO even reported that one particularly ingenious student had forged a student visa refusal letter, sent it to a college and received a refund of tuition fees, then proceeded to travel to the UK on a student visa.

It is difficult to get an exact idea of the incidence of these types of practices, but there is evidence that they are widespread. In addition to the information about forgeries and malpractices received by the British High Commission, students and others, a number of agencies in Gulshan and Banani were visited in order to investigate these claims. These visits were made with a Bangladeshi (an ex-agency worker himself) posing as a student, while this researcher presented herself as a potential sponsor. Of six agencies visited, three offered upfront to arrange forged documentation in order to fulfill financial requirements for student visa, or to provide contacts who could arrange this. It is also noteworthy that an advertisement placed in the *Daily Star* for agencies to advertise at no cost on a new RMMRU website received no response.

#### *iv) Misleading Genuine Students About Quality of Institutions*

This study found that, in many cases, information that agencies give regarding the nature and quality of educational establishments and courses offered is extremely misleading. Clearly, because agencies receive a commission from universities and colleges, one would not expect them to offer objective advice on study options. For example, they will only promote the universities or colleges they represent, sometimes favouring those institutions who pay the highest commission. Even so, agents can potentially provide useful and accurate information on the colleges and universities they do represent, which students are free to compare against other information sources.

Yet, research revealed that information on specific colleges is often inaccurate or misleading. For example, students may be told that a little-known and third-rate establishment is one of the UK's most prestigious and reputable colleges. Attractive promotional materials and websites are also used to create a false impression about the nature of colleges. In other cases, inaccurate information may be given regarding the courses running at a certain college.

As the previous section described, the quality of educational establishments in the UK is one of the areas that Bangladeshis are least informed about. As a consequence of misleading information from agencies, some students end up at colleges that do not suit their needs, provide the quality of education or run the course that they hoped to get from the UK. Interviews and discussions revealed a number of examples where a student had been disappointed with their college on arrival in the UK and had returned to Bangladesh. For example, one student interviewed arrived at his college to discover that the department he sought to do his studies in did not exist. In other cases, students arrived to find that no proper courses were running at all.

This suggests that there are a number of bogus colleges in the UK, which are not really running the courses they claim. The phenomenon has received some attention in the UK media in the last few years and has been the subject of debate in the Home Office and UK education sector. The nature of these colleges and their role in facilitating labour migration is discussed below.

For genuine students, arriving at such a college disappoints their expectations of UK education and creates a dilemma about what to do next. Those who wish to remain in the UK are unable to complain to anyone that they are not attending a proper college as they may risk deportation. While some do return to Bangladesh and others may succeed in changing college, it seems likely that some who find themselves in this situation having paid considerable money to get there may

decide to remain in the UK and work. If this is the case, then it may be that through this deception, genuine students are being transformed into irregular labour migrants, adding to the numbers of those who are intentionally seeking to work on a student visa.

*v) Student Migration as a Route to Labour Migration*

In addition to those who genuinely want to study in the UK, student migration in Bangladesh is also used as a route to getting to the UK in order to work. From discussions with those involved in the student migration process, it appears that a large number of Bangladeshis attempting to migrate as students to the UK may be intending to work on arrival. A number of agencies, the British Council and London Metropolitan's counseling service all reported this and said that their first task when meeting a prospective student is to assess whether or not they are genuine.

The use of student migration as a route to labour migration must be understood in the context of the restrictive nature of the UK's current immigration policy, in particular, the lack of avenues for unskilled and semi-skilled labour migration to the UK. Aside from finding an irregular migration route, which often involves high risks, student migration currently provides the easiest avenue for unskilled labour migrants to enter the UK.

For those involved in processing applications for UK study, such as the British Council, British High Commission and UK colleges and universities, distinguishing genuine students from labour migrants is a daunting task. It is not always possible to know someone's intentions; even a student with a good academic background applying with genuine documents may be intending to work on arrival. In other cases, the decision to work may be taken once a student is in the UK.

While it may be impossible to prevent people intent on working in the UK applying as students, it is important to acknowledge the instrumental role played by both dubious UK colleges and Bangladeshi agencies in facilitating irregular labour migration. It has already been noted that some genuine students are ending up at bogus or substandard colleges in the UK after receiving misleading information from agencies. However, in other cases, students are applying to the same low grade colleges and intending to work on arrival. In fact, students who intend to work are often looking for a college which has low entrance requirements and does not insist on proper attendance. The past decade has seen the emergence of numerous bogus colleges which meet this demand. Mostly located in East London and sometimes consisting of just a few small rooms, these colleges are not proper educational establishments, but are really businesses which issue offer letters and degree certificates in exchange for tuition fees, thus facilitating labour migrants to gain entry to and remain in the UK on student visa. Tuition fees at such colleges can be as low as 1000 GBP. Those interviewed from the British High Commission, British Council and public universities were well aware of the existence of such colleges. One person at the British High Commission reported that he had himself observed international students going into one of these colleges, registering attendance, and then walking across the street to work in a fast food restaurant.

There are indications that many colleges being marketed by agencies are of this nature. According to one agency representative, some agencies who also deal in labour migration will even suggest entering the UK on a student visa in order to work (SEDA UK EF). The British High Commission is well aware of this problem and doubts regarding applicants' intentions to study is one reason for

rejection of a number of student visa applications. There is also a high number of applications to small and little-known colleges, as opposed to public universities. In fact, one ECO estimated that 90 percent of student visa applications they received were to this type of college, even though the vast majority of students were applying for Bachelor's or Master's level courses rather than vocational qualifications. This was confirmed by several hours spent with the ECO examining current student visa applications. All applications looked at were for obscure colleges in East London who were charging tuition fees around 1,500 GBP.

Clearly, it is not possible to assume that colleges are not genuine because they have low entrance requirements or charge low tuition fees, and the British High Commission cannot reject applications on mere suspicion. Investigation of such colleges in the UK is required to ascertain which are running proper classes of an acceptable standard. However, there are indications that some of these colleges may not be genuine. For example, websites often offer unconvincing and incomplete information, and entrance requirements seem unrealistic for the courses offered. When examining student visa applications, it was noted that several applicants had obtained an offer letter from the college even though they did not have an adequate level of English. For example, in a few cases, the applicant only had a certificate for an unrecognized English course of one month, but had been accepted for Master's level study with the explanation that they would be required to complete an intensive English course on arrival. It should also be pointed out that there is not necessarily a clear line between 'bogus' and 'real' colleges, just as there is no clear line between 'bogus' and 'real' students. It may well be that some colleges do run courses of a very low standard but simply turn a blind eye to non-attendance. It also seems likely that some students attend some classes, while also working more than the permitted hours. In such cases, whether colleges are accountable for students' activities becomes a grey area.

Aside from those who receive offers from cheap low grade colleges, it is also common practice for students to take up a place at a reputable institution, then to drop out and change to a low grade or bogus college on arrival. In some cases, this may be because an application to a public university stands a higher chance of success for obtaining a student visa; in other cases, the decision to drop out may be made later. This creates a problem for public universities in the UK; a number of university representatives interviewed at the UK Education Fair (2006) reported very high drop-out rates for Bangladeshi students, in some cases as high as 50 percent (Nottingham Trent). Some would only attend for the first week or so, while others would not show up at all. In fact, the Home Office estimated in 2005 that in the last year, 17,000 non-EU students had failed to take up a place at university after accepting an offer. This has motivated many universities to demand a proportion of tuition fees in advance, in order to try to filter out the non-genuine students. For example, London Metropolitan University requires students to pay a bank draft of 2000 GBP in order to apply for a student visa, an arrangement which they set up with the British High Commission. Many other universities have taken similar steps. Dundee University charges 30 percent of the tuition fees in advance, and Nottingham Trent now demands a deposit of 50 percent of tuition fees.

In addition to facilitating the entrance of non-genuine students, there is evidence that bogus UK colleges also play a role in facilitating overstay, either by putting students in contact with agents that help secure visa extensions or by enrolling students who have completed their studies at another institution. In 2004, an investigation was conducted by a journalist of *The Guardian* newspaper into the possibility of enrolling at London colleges for the purpose of obtaining a visa extension without attending regular classes. She discovered that one college would enroll her on

an MA in Business Administration for 700GBP and she would only have to attend two classes a week, while another recommended a computing course which would only require her to sign in once a month (*The Guardian*). One person interviewed in this study had also managed to remain in the UK by this means; on completion of his MA, he had enrolled on another MA at a bogus college in London.

As this illustrates, the problem of student visa abuse is not specific to Bangladeshi students but a product of the UK's growing and unregulated market in overseas education. As described in another recent article in *The Guardian*, 'The business of bringing students and educators together has spawned hoards of agents across the globe of varying degrees of competence, to recruit overseas students to UK universities and colleges. It has also simulated a massive British education bazaar where offerings range from the glittering qualifications of elite universities to classes in small backstreet offices (*The Guardian*, 'Systematic Abuse' September 2005). According to the same article, out of 1,200 colleges inspected in 2005, 300 were found to be unfit to take foreign students, while the Home Office estimated 5,000 a year were abusing the student visa system.

The Home Office has made various efforts to address the problem of student visa abuse. Most significantly, in 2004 it set up a Joint Education Taskforce to monitor student visas at a group of institutions, in order 'to work out patterns of abuse and take appropriate action to clamp down when people don't report for study'. This taskforce was made up of UK universities, the Association of Colleges, Independent Higher Education Providers and English UK, who advertise UK education abroad. Under the project, the Home Office informed universities about visas issued and universities informed the Home Office about students who failed to enroll or ceased to attend.

It appears from research that many student receiving countries may be facing similar problems regarding visa abuse. Education scams are not only a problem in the UK's private education sector, but are a feature of the booming international market in student migration. Although the scale of the problem remains unknown, this study found examples in Australia and Canada of fake colleges misleading genuine students and facilitating labour migration.

In summary, it seems that the process of student migration from Bangladesh to the UK is not being governed or regulated effectively at either end, but is dominated by bogus colleges in the UK and unscrupulous agents in Bangladesh representing them, who profit from misleading genuine students and assisting prospective labour migrants to enter the UK on student visas.

## **SECTION 5: EXPERIENCES OF UK STUDY**

Through a workshop and several interviews, returned and current UK students were asked about their experiences of studying and living in the UK. In particular, they were asked what they had gained from the experience and what difficulties they had encountered, regarding academic study, social life, British culture and paid work.

For the majority of students interviewed, studying in the UK had been a positive experience. Academically, students said they had benefited from the critical mindset of UK education, which differed from public universities in Bangladesh. Students also felt that they had gained a different

perspective on their field of studies. Adjusting to differences in teaching style and subject content was not always easy though and it was not always possible to apply knowledge gained in the UK to Bangladesh. Although those interviewed had had positive experiences, as noted above, there was also evidence that some Bangladeshi students are arriving in the UK to discover the college they had enrolled in did not meet expected standards, leading to disappointment, frustration and despair about what to do next.

Aside from academic studies, students referred to other gains from living in the UK, for example, learning to adjust to a different culture and meeting other international students from a range of countries. Participants in the workshop also said they had benefited from the experience of living independently and having to do everything on their own, such as cooking, washing and other domestic chores. For many, this was the first time in their lives they had had to perform these tasks themselves and they saw this as a positive experience.

When asked about their social life in the UK, the experiences of those interviewed varied. Some had found it easy to meet people, but a few had found it difficult to establish close friendships. Some had lived and socialized mainly with Bangladeshis during their time in the UK, while others had mixed with British or other international students. Many students said that they had mixed with a combination of Bangladeshis and other Asian students, for example, from Pakistan and India. On the whole, students had found it easier to form close relationships with other Asian Muslim students. Someone explained this by saying that, while it was easy to mix with British people, there was an implicit self-restraint for Bangladeshis and it was hard to develop friendships because they could not get involved with UK pub and club culture.

The workshop participants agreed that other students were more likely to respect their different culture and values than people they met outside of university, for example, in casual jobs. Most students interviewed had felt reassured while in the UK by the multiculturalism of British society and the high number of Asians living there. Most said they had not experienced racism, although a few incidences were given of racist insults, which happened in the period following 9/11. One student who had also studied in Australia claimed that the racism he had suffered as a student there was much worse than in Britain.

The majority of returned students interviewed had worked part-time while studying in the UK. For example, of the students in the workshop, a number had worked in the same supermarket, one had worked in a craft shop and another as a university invigilator. Participants were aware of the 20 hour restriction on working, but most had exceeded this by making an agreement with an employer to register only 20 hours of work. Some had worked up to 40 hours a week during term time, depending on their study work load. During holidays, most had worked the maximum 54 hours. Most students interviewed had found it relatively easy to find work, although some had had problems understanding local accents. They felt that working in the UK had been a useful learning experience, both in terms of understanding British culture and learning useful interpersonal skills. For the majority, this was the first time they had done particular types of jobs.

Although most students had needed to do paid work in order to support themselves, only one person interviewed had faced severe financial problems while studying in the UK. In his case, the sponsor, who was a relative resident in the UK, had failed to provide the necessary funds for him to complete his studies. On account of this, he had been forced to drop out of university and return to

Bangladesh without completing his MA. Other problems encountered in settling in to life in the UK included logistical obstacles for foreigners, such as getting a mobile phone contract and opening a bank account.

## **SECTION 6: THE UK'S NEW POINTS-BASED SYSTEM**

In March 2006, the UK Government introduced a new 'points-based system' for managing migration to the UK, which is likely to come into effect by July 2007. There is no scope in this paper for a proper evaluation of the new system, the details of which are still being developed. However, it is worth considering what the implications of this system may be for student migration to the UK and what bearing it will have on some of the issues discussed above. The section below gives a brief outline of the new system as regards student migration and identifies a few of its potential benefits and shortcomings.

The new points based system identifies five tiers: highly skilled individuals, skilled workers, low skilled workers, students and youth mobility and temporary workers. Tier 4, which covers students, will be subdivided into 3 categories: general student, school and study through work.

Requirements for obtaining a student visa will not change dramatically under the new system. However, using points as the basis of decisions allows us to introduce a more structured decision-making process. The applicant will claim points for meeting certain criteria and will provide evidence to support the points claimed. Points will be awarded for certificate of sponsorship, funds, previous compliance with immigration conditions and English Language. The decision-maker then works through the points claimed and evidence provided for each set of points in a structured fashion. This contrasts with the current system, where documents submitted do not necessarily support what is said in the application form and where the decision-maker has to go through all these documents to decide whether a student meets the requirements of the Immigration Rules. In this respect, the new system should bring a greater degree of consistency to decision making and be more based on a set of objective criteria and less on personal judgment. In addition, the points system should make the criteria to be met clearer to applicants. Students will be able to complete a self-assessment online in order to ascertain whether they meet the requirements for obtaining a UK student visa. However, although this will be easier for applicants to understand, it is unlikely to deter people who do not score sufficient points from submitting forged documents in order to score the points required.

The most important change in the new points-based system is that educational establishments will be considered as the 'sponsors' of students (not to be confused with financial sponsors). As part of their student visa application, applicants must submit a valid certificate of sponsorship from an educational institution at which the student has been offered – and accepted – a place on a course of study. The idea behind naming educational institutions as 'sponsors' of students is that it will increase their responsibility for guaranteeing that a student is pursuing the course of studies for which their student visa was awarded.

According to the Home Office Report on the new points-based system, 'the certificate of sponsorship will act as an assurance from the sponsor (to the best of their ability) that the student intends and is able to follow the relevant course of study'. In other words, if a student does not

pursue the said course of study once in the UK, the sponsoring institution will be held accountable for this. According to Home Secretary Charles Clarke, this will '[ensure] that colleges take responsibility for making sure...students comply with visa rules' (7 March 2006). One way in which educational institutions will be held to account is being awarded a 'sponsor's rating', based on their track record of supporting migrants. This rating will determine whether applicants receive more or less points for their certificate. In other words, an institution that was found not to be fulfilling its monitoring duties as a sponsor would have a harder time in obtaining student visas for its overseas students in the future.

In addition, the Home Office report claims that in order to be given sponsorship status, 'educational institutions will need to make an application to the Home Office, satisfy the requirements for the particular Tier in which they wish to sponsor migrants, and accept certain responsibilities to help with immigration control'. Only educational institutions on this list of approved sponsors will be entitled to issue certificates of sponsorship. In the case of education providers, 'in order to be included on the list of approved sponsors, institutions will need to demonstrate that they are *bona fide* learning providers accredited by a recognised body'. At the initial stage of bringing in the new system, then, there is scope for weeding out colleges who are not meeting certain standards or criteria. In fact, it is specifically the problem of bogus colleges who assist student visa abuse that this system aims to combat; the report claims that the new system 'will help weed out bogus colleges and students seeking to abuse the student route and ensure that prospective international students will receive greater quality assurance in relation to institutions in the UK.'

The above sentence reflects a recognition of some of the problems mentioned in this report. By demanding that sponsors meet certain criteria, and penalizing those who do not take responsibility for students, the new points-based system signals an attempt to address these problems by clamping down on bogus colleges who receive overseas students and encouraging genuine ones to whet students more effectively. Yet, how exactly this will work in practice remains unclear. For example, if colleges must be accredited by a recognized body, will this be any more effective than the current DfES accreditation system?

According to the report, 'The Home Office is working with the Department for Education and Skills on what will constitute "accredited" for these purposes'. Yet, if new quality standards are identified and the system becomes more than an online registration, does this mean that all private colleges will have to be inspected and assessed prior to being awarded sponsorship status? Arguably, without proper inspections, any accreditation list would be meaningless. Yet, whether the Home Office will have the time or resources to inspect the likely hundreds of hopeful student sponsors is doubtful.

Another grey area is how exactly education providers will be penalized if a student does not attend a course. It does seem that the new system will at least ensure better communication between education providers and the Home Office; as part of their sponsorship requirements, educational institutions will be required to report non-enrolment or discontinuation of studies by any student they sponsor. However, it seems a little unfair if institutions facing high drop-out rates and reporting them consistently are given a lower sponsorship rating. In fact, this may well deter them from reporting non-attendance, particularly in the case of colleges that are not genuine. In this sense, the new system could penalize genuine universities and colleges who are themselves suffering from high drop-out rates more than those who are actively facilitating student visa abuse.

Making colleges and universities the sponsors of students will, however, have another positive effect. As noted above, large numbers of students are currently getting their student visa for a course at a reputed institution, and then changing to a bogus college once in the UK. Under the new system, however, students will effectively be tied to their sponsoring institution, the name of which will be carried on their student visa. Students will be able to change course at the same institution but fresh in-country applications will need to be made should the student wish to change sponsors or extend the length of their stay. Even if this does not prevent students from dropping out, it will at least give a more accurate picture of where students are going and how many are dropping out of education altogether.

As discussed above, the abuse of the student visa system is connected to the restrictive nature of labour migration options to the UK, particularly regarding the unskilled and low-skilled categories. For this reason, any change in the UK's labour migration policy is likely to also have a bearing on student migration. While there is not scope here for a detailed discussion of this, it is important to emphasize that the new points-based system will further restrict unskilled and low-skilled labour migration to the UK. The basic logic of the new system is that wherever possible, low-skilled and unskilled workers will be drawn from the new European Union (EU) accession countries and only where a particular demand arises will they be accepted from outside the EU. This will close off the already limited avenues for low-skilled labour migrants from Bangladesh, such as the 'sectors-based scheme'. In light of this, it seems highly probable that many Bangladeshis will attempt to use student migration as a route to working in the UK. While increased regulation of UK education providers may make it more difficult for them to do so, it seems likely that entering on student visas will remain one of the most accessible options for those intent on working in the UK.

## **SECTION 7: CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Conclusion**

This study has dealt with a variety of issues surrounding student migration from Bangladesh to the UK, regarding both the nature of this migration and the current system for managing it.

Firstly, it explored some of the motivations for Bangladeshis to study in the UK. These included enhanced job prospects in Bangladesh, access to the international job market, higher social status in Bangladesh, historical ties with the UK, the existence of a large Bangladeshi diaspora community, English language and images of the West and global culture gained through modern media. This highlights the importance both of country context and of changes at a global level for understanding international student migration.

Secondly, this study has drawn on statistical data to analyse the current patterns and trends in student migration from Bangladesh to the UK. Statistics reveal that the most popular destinations for Bangladeshi students are, in descending order, the US, Australia, Canada, Cyprus, Japan and Malaysia. Other observations made included the impact of 9/11 on student migration and the resulting fall in the number of Bangladeshis going to the US, the emergence of Australia as a major education market, the emergence of Cyprus as a destination for students and a possible gateway to Europe and Malaysia as an example of education outsourcing. Regarding the UK, a dramatic

increase in student visa applications was noted over the last 5 years, particularly steep in the last year, accompanied by a falling success rate of applications. In terms of subjects studied, statistics revealed the popularity of business-related subjects and a clear bias towards scientific and technical subjects as opposed to arts and social sciences. A sample of recent student visa applications also pointed to a clear gender imbalance; less than 5 percent of applicants were female.

Having provided some useful background information, this study set out to describe and evaluate the current system for managing student migration from Bangladesh to the UK. The process of applying for study in the UK was described as consisting of three main stages: accessing information, applying for study and applying for a student visa. This study described these stages in detail and explored what problems exist at each stage. It also described and evaluated the role of the main actors involved in the process: the British Council, the British High Commission, overseas study counseling agencies and UK colleges and universities.

The first major problem identified concerns access to information on studying in the UK. This study found that although a range of information sources are freely available to Bangladeshis, in many cases prospective students are unable to access this information independently. This can be because they lack the necessary English language or research skills or because they are unaware of or lack access to existing information sources. However, ability to access information was found to vary a great deal and social class was identified as a crucial factor in this. Whereas students from a wealthy background tended to have good English language skills, internet access, social contacts abroad and greater confidence in finding information, those from less privileged backgrounds often required help. Students outside of Dhaka and especially in rural areas were also found to be at a disadvantage when it came to accessing information.

For many Bangladeshis, overseas study counseling agencies provide the major source of information on UK study, which is due partly to their extensive advertising in a range of locations. The perception that agencies offer a 'fast-track' route through the system and will help overcome formal obstacles also explains their popularity. While acknowledging the potentially useful role that genuine agencies can play in facilitating student migration from Bangladesh to the UK, this study highlighted the need for greater regulation of such agencies in Bangladesh. Primary research uncovered a range of deceptive and fraudulent practices, which appear to be widespread in Bangladesh. The main malpractices discussed were charging unnecessary fees, conning students out of money, assisting in fraudulent applications and misleading students regarding the quality of UK educational establishments. In fact, it was found that in many cases agencies are representing substandard or bogus colleges in the UK. The existence of such establishments reflects the current lack of regulation within the UK private education sector, which constitutes a major part of the problem.

Finally, this study has discussed the use of student migration as a route to irregular labour migration to the UK. While no exact figures are available, research suggests that a high number of applicants for UK study are intending to work on arrival and that many of those entering the UK as students are doing so. Bogus UK colleges and the agencies representing them in Bangladesh were found to play a crucial role in facilitating those who intend to work, as well as misleading many genuine students. However, while acknowledging the role of these colleges and agents, this report also argued that the use of student migration as a route to labour migration is a result of the

restrictive nature of the UK's immigration policy regarding entry of unskilled and semi-skilled labour migrants.

The problems identified regarding the process of student migration from Bangladesh to the UK have a number of negative consequences. From the perspective of Bangladeshi students, many are failing to access good quality information or are being cheated out of money or decent education by unscrupulous agents. This not only impacts individuals, but also prevents Bangladesh maximizing the potential benefits it can gain from sending genuine students to gain knowledge and skills in the UK. From the perspective of genuine agents operating in Bangladesh, they face the problem of being associated with the deception and fraudulence of unscrupulous agencies and may struggle to compete with profits.

In the UK, the reputation of genuine UK colleges and the international reputation of UK education may suffer because of the growing number of poor quality or bogus colleges. Publicly funded universities are losing students and income because of high dropout rates and receiving less quality students from Bangladesh as a result. From the perspective of the British High Commission, their job is made more difficult by the low quality of applications and the large volume of forged documents. From the perspective of the UK government, at a time when they are seeking to clamp down on irregular migration and restricting regular labour migration options, such efforts are countered by the flow of people entering the UK on student visas and becoming irregular workers.

Given that a new points-based system for managing migration to the UK is being introduced, this report briefly outlined how this would affect student migration from Bangladesh. The most significant change it identified was the fact that colleges and universities would be required to act as the 'sponsors' of students. This will effectively tie students to their institution and will make the institution responsible for ensuring their attendance, by giving them a 'sponsors rating' based on their track record of students' compliance. In addition, awarding points for meeting specific criteria will lead to a clearer and more consistent decision-making process.

However, a number of unresolved areas were identified within the new system. Firstly, it is unclear what kind of accreditation system will be introduced for sponsors, how this will be implemented and what will be done to make it more effective than the current DFES accreditation list. Secondly, it remains unclear how the performance of education providers in monitoring students will be assessed -- for example, whether those facing high dropout rates but reporting them consistently will be penalized. It was also noted that the points-based system further restricts the avenues for unskilled and semi-skilled labour migrants to enter the UK, which is likely to ensure the continued use of student migration as a route to working irregularly in the UK.

### **Theoretical Implications of Research**

The findings of this research have a number of theoretical implications for our understanding of international student migration more generally. As noted in the introduction, student migration tends to be treated as a relatively homogenous category of highly-skilled migration, which can either have the impact of 'brain drain' or 'brain circulation'. In other words, it is assumed that student migrants are from educated backgrounds and will later take up skilled jobs in their countries of origin or abroad. There is no doubt that in many cases it is the well-educated elite who gain access to a foreign education and in doing so, enhance their skill level and opportunities. However, this

study has highlighted the diversity of motivations, educational levels and quality of courses chosen by student migrants from Bangladesh to the UK. This group not only includes the highly educated and ambitious, but also those with a poor education record who cannot meet entrance requirements in Bangladesh. As has been shown, there is a huge diversity of educational institutions in the UK receiving Bangladeshi students, which range from renowned public universities to third rate colleges with minimal entrance requirements. Furthermore, this study has found that these students may not be destined for or aiming for highly-skilled jobs, but in many cases, wish to gain access to the UK to work in low-skilled jobs, or are convinced to do so on arrival.

The last point reveals the complex relationship that student migration has with labour migration, both skilled and unskilled. This includes not only the real outcomes of student migration, but also imagined possibilities which motivate people to apply for UK study. It seems difficult to make sense of student migration without considering the job opportunities that result from foreign education, or simply from the act of migrating. This points to the drawbacks of theorizing these two categories separately, a tendency which seems to have been influenced by the immigration regimes of receiving countries rather than by the realities of migration. This supports Skeldon's (2005) call for a more integrated approach to understanding these different types of migration.

Another finding of this study was the importance of social class regarding access to student migration, both in terms of educational background, ability to access information and capacity to meet financial costs. The significance of social class is reinforced by the important role that social networks play at various stages of the migration process. For example, family and friends act as sources of information, providing pressure or inspiration to migrate and may act as financial sponsors or support networks abroad. In many ways, this parallels the important role that social networks often play in facilitating labour migration in Bangladesh.

The advantages to those from wealthier backgrounds in accessing education in the UK raises interesting questions about the role of student migration in sustaining and reinforcing existing social divisions within Bangladesh. In some respects, foreign education can be seen as one means through which a cosmopolitan third world elite with transnational links reproduces itself by forming heterolocal social networks, as Zelinsky and Lee have argued (1998). However, as noted above, the diversity of applicants and categories of student migrants from Bangladesh warns against generalizations; in other cases, student migration could be a means through which those from less privileged backgrounds achieve social mobility.

### **Policy Recommendations**

Having identified some of the major problems and their implications, the following section puts forward a number of policy recommendations for both Bangladesh and the UK, which can help to improve the process for managing student migration.

#### *In Bangladesh*

1. The British Council's services should be more widely promoted in order to compete with the extensive advertising by other agencies. In particular, staff of colleges, schools and universities should be provided with more information on studying in the UK and

encouraged to promote the BC's PASS service. An extra effort should be made to target areas outside Dhaka.

2. The British High Commission's website should be made clearer and more user-friendly for prospective applicants. When introducing the new self-assessment system, the website should provide information on how to meet particular requirements and provide links to other useful resources. The British Council's service should be promoted.
3. A joint taskforce could be established between the British Council, the British High Commission and the Ministry of Education, in order to work towards establishing an accreditation system for agencies, bearing in mind the pitfalls involved in this and drawing on the experiences of other countries.
4. The license fee regulations for overseas counseling agencies could be reviewed in order to increase their accountability and the Government of Bangladesh could monitor practices more closely.
5. Information on formal processes of student migration to the UK could be given through newspaper advertisements, public service announcements and television spots.
6. The Bangladesh Ministry of Education website could contain some basic information on overseas study and have links to useful resources for students interested in studying in the UK.

#### *In the UK*

1. A standard accreditation system is needed for private education providers in the UK. Within the new points-based system, only accredited institutions should be allowed to act as sponsors. While this has already been proposed, steps need to be taken to ensure that only genuine colleges that meet certain quality standards gain accreditation. Accredited institutions must be effectively monitored (for example, those on the sponsors list should be subjected to random spot checks).
2. A joint database of international students could be created so that information can be easily shared regarding student visa issues, arrivals and attendance records. This will allow UK colleges and universities and the Home Office to work more closely and to share information on student visa abuse.
3. A service could be established by the Home Office in order to assist genuine international students who arrive at a substandard or bogus college and transfer them to a different college without fear of deportation. This would be an effective way of obtaining information on such colleges and preventing genuine students becoming labour migrants.
4. Universities' international offices could be provided with accurate information about the practices of overseas education counseling agencies in Bangladesh and be encouraged to keep closer check on the agencies that represent them (for example, international offices

could obtain information from arriving Bangladeshi students regarding their application procedure through a questionnaire).

5. Universities could be encouraged to deal directly with the queries of international students, for example, by establishing a separate email service in order to make it easier to obtain information independently. This email service could be given through advertisements in the Bangladeshi press.
6. The UK Government could open more avenues for unskilled and semi-skilled labour migrants to enter the UK. A greater recognition is needed that cutting off regular channels of labour migration not only encourages irregular migration but leads to the abuse of other migration channels by labour migrants.

### **Limitations of Study and Suggestions for Further Research**

This study has a number of limitations, which further research on this area could help to address.

Firstly, the number of students interviewed was relatively small and all were in Dhaka at the time of the research, either resident or visiting. To draw firmer conclusions on the factors discussed, a wider and more representative sample of students would be required. Ideally, this would include students from different areas, rural and urban, and from a range of socio-economic backgrounds, as well as students who had remained in the UK on completion of studies.

One important finding of this research has been the high incidence of irregular and fraudulent practices within the student migration process in both Bangladesh and the UK. However, information on this has been based largely on secondhand reports and in order to understand and combat these problems effectively, more thorough investigation is required.

A number of specific areas warrant more attention than this study has been able to provide. For instance, this study was unable to look in any detail at the financing of student migration and the role that family or social networks play in this. Just as many studies have been done regarding access to and financing of labour migration, it would be revealing to investigate further how students and their families meet the high costs involved in student migration to the UK.

There is also scope for investigating the role of family and social networks in influencing the decision to study abroad. This would require interviews with not only students themselves, but also friends or family members who may be important actors in the student migration process, providing support, advice, information or exerting social pressure.

Having noted the role of social networks, it would be interesting to see whether the phenomenon of 'chain migration', relevant to many other forms of migration within and from Bangladesh, also manifests itself in the case of student migration. For example, are there pockets of people from particular villages going to study in a certain destination country? Empirical observation suggests that this may be the case, but further research on this is required.

This study has not addressed the developmental impact of student migration for Bangladesh. This would contribute to current debates on 'brain circulation' which are often conducted with insufficient

reference to empirical data. This would require gathering data such as the sort of employment Bangladeshis who study in the UK end up in, their geographical destinations and an examination of what proportion of them return to Bangladesh. Statistical information on these factors is currently very limited.

In addition, further interviews with returned student migrants could shed more light on the personal experiences and impact of studying in the UK on individuals. From a theoretical perspective, a greater understanding of the cultural influences channeled through student flows in both directions would contribute to current discourses surrounding globalization and the accompanying movement of people and ideas.

One major gap in this study concerns information on the geographical and socio-economic background of student migrants to the UK. More research on this could help to link this international student migration with internal dynamics of class within Bangladesh and the educational opportunities available to particular groups. Skeldon has emphasized the value of drawing links between internal and international migration patterns and an analysis of access to education within Bangladesh and internal student migration would enrich our understanding of international student migration.

Finally, it would be extremely valuable to compare patterns of student migration from Bangladesh to the UK with other country contexts. This could include migration from Bangladesh to other destinations, and student migration from other poor countries. As noted above, there is currently a lack of research on international student migration, despite its rapid growth and undeniable significance, particularly for the current debates surrounding migration and development. A better understanding of student migration flows, their impact and how they are being managed in different country contexts is vital in order to formulate policies which allow the potential benefits of student migration to be maximized.

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## WEBSITES

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- The British Council's Education UK website, [www.educationuk](http://www.educationuk).
- The British Council in Bangladesh, [www.britishcouncil.org/bangladesh](http://www.britishcouncil.org/bangladesh)
- The UK Home Office, [www.homeoffice.gov.uk](http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk)
- Higher Education and Research Opportunities (HERO), [www.hero.ac.uk](http://www.hero.ac.uk)
- Department for Educational Standards (DfES), [www.dfes.gov.uk](http://www.dfes.gov.uk)
- Quality Assurance Agency, (QAA) [www.qaa.ac.uk](http://www.qaa.ac.uk)
- Prospects UK, [www.prospects.ac.uk](http://www.prospects.ac.uk)
- UKCOSA, [www.ukcosa.org.uk](http://www.ukcosa.org.uk)

## **ANNEX 1: Interviews**

Ms Riaqah Ripa Walie, Education Promotion and Marketing Manager, British Council, 8 March 2006

Mr John Verney (First Secretary, Visa Operations Manager) and Mr Trevor Maloney (ECO, Immigration Section), British High Commission, 24 March 2006

Mr K M Mahharul Islam, Head of London Metropolitan University's Bangladesh Liaison Office and Sazia Alam, Counselor, 5 March, 2006

Mr Mark Bickerton, Director of Student Recruitment, Marketing and Communications for London Metropolitan University, 18 March 2006

Mr Faizul Tanim, Reporter, The Daily Star newspaper, 1 March 2006

Owner of Overseas Education Counseling Service, 9 March 2006

Md. Iftekar Khaled Ferdous, Manager IDP, 25 Feb 2006

Visiting representatives of 6 UK colleges and universities, 11 March 2006

Representative of SEBA agency, 11 Mar 2006

Ex-employee in BSE agency, 16 Mar 2006

Individual interviews and discussions were held with a number of prospective and current students between 1 Feb and 30 April 2006

## **ANNEX 2: Workshop, Education Fairs and Agency Visits**

Workshop 'Experiences of student migration to the UK', 9 May 2006

### **Participants:**

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Zohora Zafar (Programme Officer, RMMRU)

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Penelope Anthias (Research Intern, RMMRU)

### **Education Fairs**

UK Education Fair (organized by the British Council), Dhaka Sheraton Hotel, 11 March 2006

Australian Education Exhibition (organised by IDP), Dhaka Sheraton Hotel, 25-26 February 2006

### **Agencies Visited**

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