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## 2 Asian University for Women

### Liberal Arts and Leadership for Women (Shoes or No Shoes)

Asian University for Women (AUW) is a small, private institution dedicated to providing a rigorous “American style” liberal arts education to women from Asia – many of whom come from marginalized communities – to prepare them for lives of purpose and leadership. The campus resides in a set of apartment buildings, three on each side and two across the back, with a high gate that provides a measure of privacy and peace within the bustling port city of Chittagong, Bangladesh. The city has 8 million residents and is home to sixteen universities. Its economic base historically has come from its ties to the shipping industry and garment factories. However, some who work in Chittagong describe it as lacking the cosmopolitan qualities of Dhaka, the nation’s capital. There are fewer international flights. As one AUW faculty member explained, “There are shopping malls here and restaurants. Food is cheap. But you don’t get what you would get in the capital. It’s a quieter place. So, you focus on your job more – teaching – being a liberal arts college.”

AUW is a small institution and currently serves 1,345 students from seventeen countries. Those who work there describe it as a “family” and a “community” – and as “comfortable.” Indeed, it is a place apart. As one faculty member who grew up in the city explained, “The first time I stepped on campus I remember thinking ‘I’m not in Bangladesh anymore.’ Women were dressed as they pleased, and they spoke as they pleased. There was a real atmosphere of feeling liberated.” This was a stark contrast to her experiences growing up when she rarely saw women on the streets.

The institution was founded in 2008. It is, in a real sense, the realization of the dream of one man, Kamal Ahmad. Kamal’s vivid childhood memories of the civil war that led to the independent nation of Bangladesh in the

1970s marked it as a turbulent time. As he put it, there was “one man-made or natural disaster after another occur. You saw all the vulnerability of people.” Nevertheless, Bangladesh is a country with many universities and a long and rich educational history. Kamal’s father and grandfather were both professors, and he grew up at a university. Early in life, he noticed inequalities in his country. When he was fourteen years old, he saw that there were children working in the homes of families employed by the university. He and a classmate surveyed the children and the families to see if there was a willingness to allow them to go to school for a few hours each day. They hoped to start a school, but quickly their effort engendered great dissonance and resistance, even from highly educated families. Although the university had been a seedbed of social change and the revolution that created Bangladesh, many of those working there were reluctant to address the deep socioeconomic class divides. He began thinking about what a more “ethically anchored” university might look like.

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## **THE BEGINNING OF A DREAM: AUW’S ORIGINS**

Kamal’s dream lingered as he left Bangladesh to pursue an undergraduate degree at Harvard University. As an undergraduate, Kamal proved unusually adept at building connections with people – always looking for individuals whose passion, expertise, and values aligned with his own. One of his most important mentors was Henry Rosovsky, an internationally known economist and the dean of Harvard’s Faculty of Arts and Sciences during the 1990s. Upon graduating, Kamal began seeking support to launch his dream. The idea was to provide a rigorous liberal arts education to highly promising young women from disenfranchised communities. The education would be entirely free for the students; it would be paid for by donors and through grant support.

The university was an idea that ran counter to a prevailing orthodoxy in development economics at the time, which would have favored Bangladesh investing in primary education due to the significant number of illiterate children. According to this line of thinking, such an investment would produce a larger social return. But Kamal reasoned that it was important to support higher education in order to develop a cadre of leaders and teachers who could in turn support social change. Who else would serve poor communities? Nonetheless, it was a hard sell because funders tended to see higher education as an elite enterprise and, further, worried that investments in that area might lead to brain drain.

It became clear that the effort would require an “independent platform” to move forward. Kamal spoke with Ismail Serageldin, a vice president at the World Bank, who suggested that he create a taskforce to explore the possibilities. The taskforce focused on several areas. First, it articulated a clear rationale for international investment in the project (one that countered the predominant model of higher education as a private good, which dominated the World Bank’s thinking at the time). It would be necessary to explain higher education’s social impact and the capacity for affordable higher education to alleviate socioeconomic disparities. Second, Henry Rosovsky persuaded the group to focus not solely on science and technology (STEM) but to envision a general education that would create a broad foundation for success in many fields. The idea was radical. Kamal commented that some critics said, “You have a country who needs accountants and engineers. How could you ‘misdirect’ those funds to the liberal arts?” His response was to explain “the instrumental aspects of that education – how broad understanding, critical thinking, communication skills prepare students for ongoing career success.”

Rosovsky also underscored the importance of having a university governance system that would ensure autonomy and academic freedom. In the 1950s and early 1960s, there was a huge investment in higher education, but it waned when many universities became hotbeds of political protest in the late 1960s. Political control of universities increased, and academic quality and the overall academic environment suffered. In Bangladesh, the sitting political party appointed university presidents. However, Rosovsky argued that excellence and academic freedom required autonomy, including a self-perpetuating board free from direct political influence. Kamal decided to create a high-profile group, called the International Support Committee, that would help make the case for such a bold plan. He began approaching a variety of individuals about their involvement. Ultimately, the International Support Committee was cochaired by the prime minister of Bangladesh and the first lady of Denmark, and its members included the former president of the Republic of Ireland and Hungarian American philanthropist and businessman George Soros. Jack Meyer, the head of Harvard’s endowment for many years and AUW’s biggest donor, proved critically helpful in opening doors.

The committee elected a twenty-two-member board. It created two *ex officio* seats for national government officials – the Education Secretary and Foreign Secretary. One of its first tasks was to secure a charter granting the institution academic independence and immunity from taxation, with the

provision that at least 25 percent of the students must be Bangladeshi. The charter was approved by an act of parliament to avoid having changes in political administrations impact AUW's status. "It took us four years to take it through parliament," Kamal recalled. To date, the government has not tried to intrude. According to one government official, the charter is unique in the nation, where all other universities are overseen by the Ministry of Education: "This university is independent of that – it has autonomy with an independent system of accountability. Unfortunately, there is no university in South Asia that enjoys that sort of thing except for AUW." The official recalled an earlier trip to the UK with the prime minister at the time, during which they visited the University of Cambridge. In a lighthearted moment, he recalled the prime minister asking, "Why can't we have a university like this?" to which he replied, "First, you have to agree to give autonomy. Without that, there is no [great] university."

Early on, in 2004 and 2005, ideas alone held the project together. Kamal remembered asking the head of an NGO in Bangladesh whether he could use their post office box for correspondence since he was living abroad. "Things got a little complicated when we applied for a grant from the Gates Foundation, and they sent a guy to come see us," recalled Kamal. He arranged for the Gates representative to meet major supporters and donors from the region involved in the project. The copresident of the Gates Foundation in charge of global development was a classmate of Kamal's from Harvard, Sylvia Matthews (later Obama's secretary for health and human services and then president of American University, Washington, DC). Matthews said, "We don't do higher education internationally," and Kamal wondered if the dream would die there. As Kamal explained, "before we parted, she said 'Send me a business plan if you can.' It was a discouraging meeting. We didn't have a business plan. A month or so later I got a call from her office who said, 'You said you would send a business plan.' So, we scrambled to put together a document." Kamal described the resulting business plan as "more of an aspirational document than anything else." Yet it was enough and on this basis the Gates Foundation awarded the project a USD15 million grant. People believed in the idea – they saw the promise – and Kamal quickly realized, "We had to set up a bank account!"

The board began holding meetings to identify support and to plan. Wellesley College, a prestigious private women's liberal arts college in the United States, hosted one early meeting, which enabled the board members to see an elite women's college at work. Ultimately the board decided to rent a couple of apartment buildings and convert them into academic space. Efforts

were made to reach out to various communities in hopes of recruiting students. Renovations to the building were complete right before the first group of young women from six countries arrived in 2008. Kamal had no idea whether anyone would show up.

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## AUW OPENS ITS DOORS

But they did show up. With students at the institution, people began to see that the project was possible. One supporter, the daughter of a prime minister of Malaysia, was amazed at seeing students who had arrived just six months earlier lead conversations and talk through PowerPoint presentations about their academic work. As Kamal put it, “a lot of the support we got came out of the self-evident triumph of these young women.” Indeed, it was a self-selecting and remarkable group of young women – willing to take a risk in order to secure an education for themselves. From its inception, AUW existed primarily to serve young women from disenfranchised communities. As one senior administrator explained:

Its initial mission was to attract young women from very disadvantaged communities – the urban poor, the rural remote rural areas or hill tribes, the garment workers – a diverse set of women from very underserved communities who could not pay and would never have dreamed of going to higher education. For the first seven years there was no idea of having any fee-paying students.

However, building trust with these communities required patience and diplomacy. As Kamal explained it:

I always say we need three things. We need to build trust, otherwise families will not send their daughters. Second, we need to have flexible admissions that accounts for addressing deficiencies in their academic preparation. Third, financial aid. We have some families that can't afford ten dollars. So, we eliminated that excuse. We say everyone can apply. I often say if you have shoes or no shoes, it doesn't matter.

The approach has proven remarkably successful.

While AUW today has a modern online application system, its admission process has been highly innovative and adaptive – sometimes even community specific. It involves building relationships with particular communities. This often entails explaining to influential community leaders the mission of the university and garnering their support. Meetings are then held with

parents and prospective students where the AUW model is described. One AUW admissions officer recalled that in one community their work finally led to the headmaster of a local school sending his daughter to AUW, which prompted many other families to follow suit. This success led to a series of efforts with local leaders in the region aimed at identifying promising young women who might attend. For example, in northeast India, AUW staff members recruited prospective students from among families working in the tea fields. They worked closely with members of the India Tea Association, whom the families knew could vouch for them. They collaborated with a well-known and well-regarded social worker in the region who was seen as an independent and nonpolitical authority. In other countries, academics have helped make connections with remote communities. In northeast Myanmar, an anthropologist working with the Shan community helped identify potential recruits. They have identified local foundations and trusts that have contact with disenfranchised or remote communities. For example, in Burma, one foundation has been helpful in finding young women from remote mountain areas. Remarking on this work, Kamal noted, “We don’t have the resources to create our own infrastructure, we’ve sort of tagged on to other people’s networks.” It has proved remarkably successful. Within a few short years, AUW had as many as forty applicants for each available slot.

AUW continued to look for new communities. Kamal turned to the garment industry in Bangladesh with the perspective, “There are four and a half million people – there has got to be some incredible young women, we should go there.” He also was determined to find promising applicants from more than a million Rohingya refugees. While young women from these communities often lacked adequate academic preparation, Kamal felt sure that AUW could address this challenge through preparatory programs. Kamal approached factory owners in Chittagong, saying that the university would provide an education and leadership training for promising young women working in the factory who took the test and qualified, thus preparing women for future management roles in the factories. However, the stipulation was that the factories would need to continue paying their wages to their families since that often was a precondition for them to secure parental approval to attend. Kamal also approached Grameen Bank, which provides loans, often very small amounts, to more than 8 million Bangladeshis. Kamal approached the bank and said, “Your managers meet with borrowers every week in the villages. Will you have your managers tell people there is a university looking for their best daughters academically?” Kamal reflected on this approach, “With zero transaction costs, we reached 8 million members.”

AUW also has developed an admissions system aimed at maximizing opportunities for young women from low-income backgrounds where opportunities for schooling are limited. The university created a two-stage system for testing applicants in their local languages. The first stage enables staff to determine if a prospective student has reached a minimum threshold of academic preparedness to be considered for admission. Those who successfully complete this part of the test are admitted to AUW's Pathways for Promise, a preparatory program. A second part of the admissions test gives applicants scenarios to respond to and resolve. This enables AUW staff to see how applicants approach problems, their degree of creativity, their communication skills, and their empathy. As one staff member explained, "We believe that these are the qualities that are going to make a leader, much more than simply language and math. We want these young women to be future leaders." Of those who do well on this part of the test, about half, are admitted to AUW's Access Academy, an undergraduate foundation year that further prepares students for a rigorous liberal arts education. Only a very small number are admitted directly to AUW's undergraduate program, because even students who attended English-medium schools often are not used to a liberal arts environment that requires problem-solving and critical thinking. A senior admissions officer explained:

A lot of what we look for in applicants is their grit and determination. An applicant may not have the best score on the admissions test, although they have to score at a certain level, but they show in their essay and interview some spark – some determination to do something . . . We look for leadership potential, although we don't have a scientific tool to assess that – we do have the interview process, which produces the best match. We look for a girl who has been reading or learning to sing on her own, at times in societies where maybe singing is not allowed.

It is this holistic approach to reviewing candidates, and valuing qualities like tenacity and perseverance over traditional academic markers, that has enabled AUW to accomplish transformational work.

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## CREATING PATHWAYS

In its early years, AUW worked to support its students regardless of their backgrounds. However, this proved challenging as they soon realized many

students were underprepared for formal academic programs. In response, AUW created both the Pathways for Promise program and Access Academy. Established in 2016, Pathways uses active learning techniques such as small-group work and peer review to help students develop mathematical skills and English for an academic environment. Initially, the number of students enrolled in Pathways was small, but it now approaches half of incoming students. Pathways was designed to not only help incoming students develop English proficiency but to also help them begin to understand what it means to learn in a liberal arts environment. As one administrator involved in Pathways explained, “We are of course an academic preparation program, but we’re trying to do these other things and they are critical to our success. This means engaging in discussions, debates, and encouraging critical thinking – seeing things from two different sides.” Many AUW students have been in circumstances where their educational experiences have not encouraged discussion and debate. They have been subject to societal systems that several AUW faculty and staff characterized as “patriarchal” and “hierarchical.” Further, many come from communities that are quite conservative in their worldview and where novelty and change are viewed with great skepticism. Transitioning into AUW is a joy to some and a challenge to others. A writing instructor, commenting on students’ reflective writing, noted:

Here we try to focus on critical thinking, analysis, and independent learning. Some students find that unsettling. It’s like if you’re walking into the ocean and the shore drops out from under you and suddenly, you’re in deep water. Others really seem to enjoy it. They felt constrained before, now they have the chance to express their own thoughts and opinions and creativity.

The Pathways program has proved enormously successful, with a retention rate of more than 90 percent. One AUW board member said, “I’ve literally seen readymade garment workers speaking fluent English in less than three months.”

Access Academy is a “non-degree bearing flagship year of pre-collegiate courses . . . [and] is designed to help students overcome prior deficits in their educational background and prepare for success in AUW’s Undergraduate Program” (AUW, n.d.). In addition to creating a smoother transition for students into undergraduate studies, both Pathways and Access Academy enabled AUW to bring on board relatively inexperienced English-language instructors right out of college to grow their instructional staff and support to students. As one AUW administrator recalled regarding the decision to recruit college graduates, “We felt they would make up for the lack of teaching



experience by sheer intelligence and commitment, and that turned out to be the case.” A partnership with World Teach enabled AUW to hire twenty recent college graduate instructors who moved to campus and proved to be exemplary role models for the first students in these preundergraduate programs.

AUW’s undergraduate curriculum initially had four majors – economics, public policy, philosophy, and environmental science. There are plans to develop a school of education and a school of environmental engineering. In the early years, the institution sought the advice of external academics to help develop the curriculum. They were especially aided by colleagues at Wellesley College, an elite women’s institution in the United States. The university also established The Core Program, which consists of eleven courses in the first year, modeled on the University of Chicago. The courses introduce students to the social sciences, humanities, natural sciences, and math and cover a variety of content areas, including social analysis, ethical reasoning, literature, and civilization studies. In 2016, AUW decided to move from a four-year to a three-year curriculum, including summers. This proved to be a more financially sustainable approach. Further, it alleviated the challenges some students faced traveling back and forth from their home countries and communities and in some cases the pull of familial obligations.

AUW has sought not only to provide rigorous academics but also to replicate the finest liberal arts experience – in other words, learning and personal growth both inside and outside the classroom. As one administrator explained, “We believe in a wholesome development of a student – not just academics – we want the student to be able to be confident, to stand up, to speak for herself, to be able to articulate what she or the society needs. We empower them to be very self-confident. In the last two years with us, their body language changes.” The cocurricular offerings are substantial. At AUW, young women can learn martial arts, fine arts, music, athletics. “We help harness skills a student has, whether you’re good at crafts or singing, we have twenty-seven-plus clubs at the university and new ones all the time.” The first woman golfer in Afghanistan helped establish AUW’s golfing club, and the university used its connections to gain access to a local golf course. Many cocurricular offerings emphasize appreciation for other cultures and religions. Performing arts is especially prominent, and performances are a common way to share cultural richness. As one senior administrator put it, “It’s a magical experience.” According to a staff member, “These are enrichment experiences that relatively few universities in South Asia have.” The end result is the establishment of powerful personal bonds. As one administrator put it, “Our young women, after four or five years of

study, make friends from 19 or 20 countries forever. They become sisters, not just friends. And that network will help on the next level [as they begin their careers].”

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## RECRUITING FACULTY: AN EXCITING AND CHALLENGING MISSION

Alongside the strategy of recruiting recent college graduates to serve as Access Academy and Pathways instructors – bolstering the institutions’ nascent instructional and student support staff – AUW also made concentrated efforts to attract faculty. They began by reaching out to the diaspora from the region. They approached people just finishing their PhDs, holding sessions with advanced PhD students at institutions like Harvard and MIT. They tried to provide a clear context for the work – people working there would be physically safe; they would have access to healthcare and educational opportunities if they had children. They would also be contributing to the launch of a truly visionary university. Indeed, it is the compelling vision of AUW that is a constant across the faculty and staff there. When asked why she chose to come to the university, one administrator said, “I think most people at AUW do not work here for the money. It’s more about identifying with the mission.” Another noted, “People come here if they are interested in supporting humanity. This is a place where someone can connect their brain and the heart.” A longtime faculty member echoed these sentiments, “I was drawn to AUW because I was born in the region and because of the mission and vision of the university. The idea of empowering women – especially from a diverse background and especially from lower SES groups . . . The mission draws people in, and they have continued this mission and vision of bringing in people who would otherwise not have a chance to get a college education.” Another administrator said, “Working at AUW is all about the mission! . . . It’s not about trying to create an MIT or Harvard but becoming [an institution] that can impact society and especially communities where no one goes to college.”

Even though faculty find AUW’s vision compelling, from its earliest days the university has struggled with faculty turnover. While many members of the faculty stay at the institution for many years, others remain for brief periods and then depart. Reflecting on this challenge, one senior administrator noted, “Recruiting faculty has been somewhat challenging. Particular people tend to be drawn to these positions. It has proved much easier to attract people beginning their careers – early or mid career. They are

attracted to AUW's mission and are at an age where they are open to exploring, travel and developing research and teaching experience." Indeed, being enticed to sign on due to the institution's idealistic mission, some faculty and staff found themselves surprised by what they found when they arrived on campus. One remarked, "I was expecting a much larger campus. That was one of my first thoughts . . . I remember walking on to campus, they call it AUW Lane. It's literally one lane . . . I think all of my colleagues at the time, we all had the same reaction. This is it?" Another recalled, "My first impression was very disappointing. I'd gone from seeing a sprawling campus at my previous university and suddenly you see a very small building. I was taken aback." However, initial impressions were soon ameliorated by the vibrancy of the campus. As one noted:

The lovely thing is that it's a very small community, right? And the students are so active. You've got twenty different countries and festivals from twenty different countries. So, on a daily basis, you're teaching them in class and AUW is right outside your window, and you can hear the festivals happening – the food festivals, the competitions and language. It's a very dynamic space.

Another said, "It's such an active campus – buzzing with that company of students. Something or other is always happening." It is also worth noting that the promise of a large World Bank loan to build a stand-alone campus on the 140 acres of land given by the government to the university is a dream that many cling to as they continue the work in cramped quarters on AUW Lane.

Faculty work at AUW is challenging, and it calls for a particularly dedicated individual. A senior administrator explained:

It's very hands on [at AUW]. It requires a faculty member who is passionate about educating women and empowerment. Many of our faculty from the US say that they have never come across a project like this. The mission is attractive to them. Some come expecting to stay for a year and stay for several years or even longer. They really see the impact and they say that teaching these girls is a marvelous experience, because they're so full of energy and such passion and their desire to learn is unparalleled.

The annual teaching load for faculty at AUW is six courses over three semesters – fall, spring, and summer. This leaves relatively little downtime for faculty. Courses are a combination of lectures, group discussion, and groupwork. A faculty member can teach the load in whatever configuration

they want. There are other responsibilities as well. This includes serving on university and department committees. Faculty advise student clubs. There is also a science summer school for high school students that serves about sixty students. There is no tenure, but a number of faculty expressed hope that this would be instituted sometime in the future. Currently faculty have one-, three-, or five-year contracts. The fact is that as a donor-supported institution, AUW does not have long-term financial stability to grant tenure.

Teaching at AUW requires special skills. One senior faculty member explained:

We tell new faculty that they need to work with students and that they need patience. They may be good academics and have a lot of publications, but they might not know what to say to active girls who love to challenge the faculty and sometimes raise questions that are challenging – sometimes triggering. That's why we pick faculty who have had experience working in multicultural environments and experience with vulnerable or marginalized groups so they can understand the spirit of AUW. Otherwise, they may come with big academic expectations – I'll come here and the university will pay for my research – but the main priority of the institution is the students.

Faculty who do succeed describe it as fulfilling but challenging. As one put it:

This is not a place where you come in and give a lecture. In places like Bangladesh at most universities students don't ask questions. They're afraid of asking questions. At other universities faculty members come in, teach, and leave. At AUW it's completely the opposite. You need to create an environment where the teacher is not feared – a good environment where you feel comfort. We are also very open and have regular advising meetings. We are open to students reaching out to us. It's not like that at other typical universities.

Indeed, a number of faculty pointed to the time they spent in one-on-one meetings with advisees and students in their classes. Further, the work extends far beyond the academics. As one faculty member noted:

You have to know how to communicate with students who come from very different backgrounds – very disadvantaged backgrounds. If you're the kind of person who gives the students a sense of trust and they feel comfortable, they may confide in you. For me that's more than welcome. But I am sometimes concerned about my lack of skills when it comes to those challenging conversations that should probably be had with a therapist.

In addition to teaching and the expectation of some research activity, faculty spend a great deal of time advising students, often in one-on-one tutoring and support. Some feel that this work isn't adequately factored into their workload. The intensity of the work can be draining, and some faculty find it difficult to sustain it after a few years – they become mentally exhausted. A few conclude that the heady, idealistic vision that drew them to AUW, while compelling, remains an elusive dream.

Despite the challenging nature of the work, many faculty members described in great detail the rewards of teaching at AUW. Many point to the powerful experiences they have working with the young women they teach and advise. One faculty member whose work explores the impact of disasters on society explained it this way:

I have developed a three-dimensional approach to teaching – I teach my students, and they teach me. I think I have learned more in the last three years than I have in the last fifteen years. Now we are drawing on real life examples from so many places – how disasters affect people's lives in Nepal or Bhutan, or Sri Lanka, or Kerala, India – we have new concepts and new stories. Students who have exceptional promise even participate in research and become co-authors.

In reflecting on her time as a faculty member at AUW, a former professor said:

The most profound thing for me was how much I felt I could learn from spending time with this community of women. It felt less like you were standing in front of a room to give a lecture. I felt like I was able to facilitate space for these women to talk and share their knowledge and their experiences and I think that is still one of the most profound gifts of this whole experience.

Another faculty colleague, echoing these sentiments, said, "Sometimes students just want to talk, they don't have any major problem. They just want to talk, and I enjoy those moments. They say we feel good after talking with you. Here it is student-centered around everything. They are at the center of AUW."

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## THE STUDENTS WE SERVE: AN EVOLVING PICTURE

AUW has students from seventeen different countries; the majority are from the Indian subcontinent. The institution is something of a microcosm of

women from across Asia, with a diversity of nationality, race, and religion as well as socioeconomic class. After a decade as a donor-funded institution where the education of all students was underwritten by philanthropic gifts, two factors have begun to shift institutional practice in admissions, with implications for the composition of the student body. First, AUW's success in educating women has led wealthy families to see it as a desirable option for their daughters. Second, AUW has begun to admit students from families that are able to pay tuition as a way to diversify revenue streams and contribute to the institution's longer-term financial stability. The university also aims to increase its total enrolments from 1,300 to 3,000 once a new campus is built. This new approach will ultimately result in half of AUW's student body coming from families able to pay for their education, and the other half continuing to come from low-income backgrounds and covered by scholarships.

With this new approach already underway, there has been a mixing of social classes that is quite radical for its context. AUW now educates young women working in garment factories alongside the daughters of wealthy families that own those factories. Garment workers' wages have been static at around USD80 a month, while the value of the sector has increased dramatically, highlighting the deep income inequality in the nation and the city of Chittagong. Mixing young women from dramatically different parts of society poses special challenges for the institution's educational efforts. Some faculty noted a tendency of some wealthier students to harbor a sense of entitlement, in stark contrast to young women from poor families who see an AUW education as a doorway to opportunity and are committed to succeeding. As one faculty member explained, "I can just see it on their faces, I can see through their body language, the ones that could care less, they're on their cell phones, and the other students who are very earnest and come up to me afterwards and want to ask me questions." Class differences have played out in interactions between students as well. As one staff member who grew up in the region explained, "This place has an almost feudalistic attitude. There are families who would not like their daughter to study in the same school where their servants' daughters are going. Those societal attitudes are prevalent on much of the Indian subcontinent. It's a big challenge."

Enrolling students with stark class differences has placed a special burden on the admissions team, which takes great pains to explain to prospective students that upwards of 70 percent of AUW students are on some form of scholarship, many from disenfranchised communities. One admissions staff member said, "We explain several times during the admissions interview that

they have to accept them as your classmates. If you come and start acting snobbish, you become difficult for the other girl.” Faculty often purposefully assign students to small groups in order to ensure that students from similar backgrounds don’t segregate themselves.

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## ACADEMIC GOVERNANCE AND FINDING VOICE

In A UW’s early years, its governance was significantly guided by the vision of Kamal Ahmad, its founder. Its status as a donor-driven institution meant that its mission and activities often followed available resources. However, as the institution became more firmly established, it grew important for other voices committed to the institution – the administration, faculty, staff, and even students – to assume great prominence.

In 2017 when the position of vice chancellor of A UW opened, Dr. Nirmala Rao applied and was offered the role. Professor Rao already had a remarkable history as an academic. Born in India, she moved to the UK in 1989 and was appointed as lecturer in Goldsmiths College at the University of London. She progressed to become head of her department and, ultimately, provost. From that position, she moved to become pro-director of the prestigious School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London. In 2011 Kamal Ahmad had reached out to Rao to tell her about A UW, which was then only a few years old. Although Rao was not ready to leave SOAS at that time, she was intrigued by A UW’s mission and drawn to the possibility of returning to the region. Recalling that moment, Rao said:

A UW has a compelling mission and one close to my heart, having spent much of my childhood in South India and coming from a very traditional family. I grew up in a society where I was surrounded by women who had absolutely no access to even basic education . . . It had always been my desire to do something for women, and this university provided me the opportunity to do that. Its mission is to reach out to the most promising and talented women from very disadvantaged areas and communities and give them a good quality education. It’s about promise and talent.

To many, Nirmala Rao’s arrival constituted a new era of stability in academic leadership and governance. As one longtime staff member explained, before Dr. Rao joined A UW, “[t]he vice chancellor’s office was a revolving door. A UW had several governance bodies. It had a board of trustees, comprised

mostly of individuals from the US, who helped with fundraising, and an Academic Council where not many of them were academics, if I'm being frank."

People recognized the essential contribution of Kamal Ahmed and felt that he rightly deserved to exert a strong influence over the institution. One explained, "Kamal is the man to whom belongs almost the exclusive credit for setting up the university . . . He did marvelous – almost a miracle. That said, he is not an academic." Another shared, "Without Kamal, this university never would have seen the light of day. His vision, his energy, his ability to reach out, and his ability to give great presentations and a very genuine presentation – that made it happen." That said, some felt Kamal's influence had at times been perhaps too strong, preventing the institution from developing its own self-sustaining processes. He had stepped in as interim vice chancellor between vice chancellors. Some faculty felt that the strong arm of the founder in academic affairs had perhaps "not been very helpful at times," as one put it. One administrator felt that Kamal's micromanaging has in some regards "stunted [the] growth" of the institution, which needed to mature and make its own decisions. Recalling the time period when Kamal was interim vice chancellor, a former administrator said, "If you think about collegial governance where the faculty, the president and deans work together – that was not in place." Further, "there were scarcely any senior faculty to provide leadership." When Rao was being interviewed for the job of vice chancellor, she recalled being told, "If you can sort out your relationship with Kamal, you will be successful." Her arrival proved to be a key turning point. Her predecessor, an American university professor, was "a very substantial person and we had great hopes that she would make it," but she left because of the challenges of working at AUW.

In 2017 AUW had a standard governance system with a board at the highest level. They did have a faculty body, but it was not part of any formal governance system. "It was pretty raw since it was only a young institution. When I joined it was only seven years old," Rao recalled. She set about creating committees, seeing them as important deliberative bodies for any academic institution and a vital part of the university's governance system. These included the Learning and Teaching Committee, which looked after academic issues; the Student Experience Committee, which supports students; and the Research and Ethics Committee, which addresses research and ethics of faculty. AUW's student government is also very active. Each reported to the Academic Council (AC), which Rao envisions as the equivalent of a faculty senate. The AC became custodian of all the standards of the



university, approving and ratifying decisions that came from the committees. “Good governance is essential for strong leadership, and strong leadership is dependent on good governance,” Rao said. She also clarified the lines of accountability: from heads of programs and associate deans to dean and then to vice chancellor. While generally welcomed, the new governance processes were a significant change. Prior to 2017, faculty meetings were open to all instructional staff. When the AC was constituted, it included only faculty from the undergraduate university and directors of Pathways and Access Academy. This left some instructional staff feeling left out. One longtime faculty member explained:

We have Academic Council meetings now, which are spaces where you can discuss and debate. But these meetings aren’t as frequent, and they are more formal in the sense that they involve presenting on different topics and people can vote yay or nay. The vice chancellor has said it’s fine for people to hold their own faculty meetings and for them to just keep her apprised of what issues emerge or things she needed to attend to. But it’s not the same as it was.

While the system may be less open and organic than it had been before, it is a reasonable structure for shared governance that will serve the institution well as it seeks to grow significantly in size.

AUW is unique in that it is an international, donor-driven institution. Foundations abroad are the vehicles for raising funds; the main one is in Boston, with others in London, Tokyo, Singapore, and Hong Kong. There is also a board of advisors in Dhaka. The board of trustees is the only ultimate operating body, and Rao reports to them. But these bodies operate with great independence, which produced something of an unstable arrangement, according to Rao. She saw the first ten years as having been somewhat chaotic – planned chaos to some extent – but chaotic nonetheless. Some members of the board did not always understand the cultural context of the university. Before Rao’s arrival, turmoil in the senior leadership produced a vacuum that led the board to step in, and lines of accountability became blurred. Rao worked to clarify roles and ensure that proper boundaries were in place.

This work involved setting up the academic committees and defining the governance roles of the board and the senior management team, sorting out lines of accountability. Formal policies were written laying out these expectations and making concrete a whole host of fundamental academic policies. For example, who should faculty inform if they are going to be off doing research or engaging in capacity-building work? What are the expectations

around research grants? What will the university get? Every detail had to be worked out. “It was a huge challenge but extremely rewarding,” Rao recalled. “Overall, administrators, faculty, staff, and students feel that they have a voice at AUW. There are many opportunities for people to speak their minds.” This was especially evident at a recent town hall meeting. One board member who attended described it thus:

People literally came up with so many questions about tuition and this and that . . . It’s amazing how everyone has a say, and I was taken aback by the extent of the directness that some of the students had. But it’s good, it’s very critical. I think AUW gives everyone a decent chance to have their voice heard. It’s very tolerant, especially the vice chancellor. There’s no reason to think it’s not democratic, it is. They were talking about tuition fees, which are higher than other area universities. But AUW is run on scholarships. It’s subsidized for people who can’t pay. Paying students have a hard time understanding this. If you made a charity supporting these kids from underprivileged backgrounds, very few people would contribute to it. This is a model of making people pay. But we need to explain it to people, we need to be transparent about the kids and make them understand that this is what we do.

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## **FINDING A SECOND ACT: AUW’S SUCCESSES AND FUTURE CHALLENGES**

For a relatively young institution, AUW has accomplished an enormous amount. It has drawn together an international faculty and staff who are superb educators and advisors and deeply committed to fostering both the academic and personal growth of their students. It has land for a future campus that will enable it to grow significantly. It has secured enormous external financial support, making college affordable to students from impoverished backgrounds. It has begun to lessen its reliance on funders and develop greater long-term financial stability by admitting fee-paying students. Finally, it has established a governance system that provides a meaningful voice to all the key constituents whose buy-in is critical for the long-term sustainability of the institution.

One of the most important indicators of the university’s success is its students’ trajectories. Many faculty and staff describe in moving ways the growth of students who come to AUW. As one faculty member reflected:

A [student] I remember who came from Afghanistan was very shy . . . She was saying she didn’t want to stay here – she’d never been anywhere without her

family. She felt alone. I said, "Have time, have patience." Slowly she found herself. She's speaking up! She's a self-sufficient and an independent young woman. She is now so courageous she joined a Facebook campaign that Afghan women are doing against the burqa and giving the message "this is my identity as an Afghan woman."

There are plenty of other markers of success as well. Many graduates now go on to attend elite graduate schools – Cambridge, Oxford, Columbia, and Stanford. Others find meaningful employment. A recent survey by the career services office found that nearly all alumni were employed and doing well in their jobs. The largest percentage worked for NGOs. As one staff member put it, given their training in critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaborating with others, "AUW alumni do really well in these jobs." Of course, being women and leaders has posed challenges for some. Several alumni described the challenges of adjusting to work cultures at more traditional organizations that are not used to articulate and able women with strong voices. AUW is now offering workshops to students and recent alumni to help with the transition after graduation.

While it's clear that AUW is coming into its own, the university also faces some important decisions as it moves from a dramatic opening to its second act. First, it will be important to be clear about AUW's mission. The institution was founded with the simple and powerful premise of providing able young women from disadvantaged communities a free education and preparing them for lives of leadership. However, the reality today is more complicated. AUW does serve many such women, yet it also draws in women from extremely wealthy families who want their daughters to benefit from education at an academically rigorous women's college with international faculty. Campus members have different feelings about what this means for AUW. Some argue that this move is "maybe diluting [the original mission] a bit." Others wonder whether, in admitting women from wealthier families and stronger educational backgrounds, AUW should adapt to meet these students' needs. As one put it, "I think going forward we may need to, while keeping true to the mission, cater a bit more to the fee-paying students."

This ambiguity of purpose was evident in some of AUW's fundraising efforts. One alumna described attending a fundraising event for wealthy donors and being encouraged to provide an account of her journey that emphasized her poverty as a child, which to her felt forced. A staff member recalled attending a similar event, "Students were asked to dress in their native costumes and to come up and give speeches that were tear jerkers . . . I felt pretty

uncomfortable about it at the time, but it raised [a lot of money].” There is no doubt that many of AUW’s students have come from impoverished circumstances, and there is no doubt that some go on to highly prestigious graduate schools. In some cases, however, the students attending those prestigious graduate schools are fee-paying, from privileged backgrounds. The story of AUW and the student accomplishments it celebrates remain powerful; yet with these substantial changes to its student body, the institution will have to find a way to present a more nuanced picture of the university’s work today.

Amid efforts to create greater financial stability through fee-paying students, the institution has continued to admit new marginalized populations of students. Most notably, it opened its doors to 300 new students from Afghanistan, supported by funds from the US Department of State. The infusion of a significant number of students with a wide range of academic preparedness produces significant challenges for integrating them into the institution. Some questioned whether such bold humanitarian efforts fit with the institution’s current mission. A few felt that such efforts might be destabilizing. As one senior administrator put it, such programs have the very real potential of “causing the mission to go pear-shaped.”

The current thinking of AUW’s leadership is that continuity and stability will also require growth from its current enrolment (1,345) to somewhere between 3,000 and 5,000 students. This will require the vision of building a new campus on its donated land to become a reality. It also will likely require AUW to serve additional full-pay students. Currently, the student body is remarkably diverse, a situation that one staff member described as “a challenge and a blessing.” The incredible cultural richness in class discussions and in the cultural activities organized by students is a tremendous strength of the university. However, there continue to be challenging cultural differences among students who come from different countries and strikingly different socioeconomic circumstances.

An institution that values the liberal arts – critical thinking and problem-solving – and encourages its students to develop the habits of mind and heart to become future leaders will necessarily have to address activism and student efforts to press for change. AUW’s system of shared governance and its governance practices through events like town halls are important means by which the institution can tap the expertise of all its constituent groups as it navigates its way forward. AUW is entering its second act as an institution – moving from its entrepreneurial founding to a position of maturity and strength. It will require the commitment and energy of all its faculty, staff, students, and board members to realize its promise moving forward.