

DREAMS ON HOLD

The Uncertainty in Education Abroad

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As the coronavirus crisis unfolds, educational institutions are left disrupted and students stranded. While those starting university this year worry about having to start such an integral part of their lives in mediocre online classes, high school students worry about the hurdles they'll have to face during the admissions process this year and how the pandemic will affect their applications. Students who were once confident about getting that acceptance letter from their dream universities now find themselves grappling with an uncertain time that seems to get worse with every passing day.

As international applicants, one of the biggest challenges that Bangladeshi students are facing is colleges in the US waiving the mandatory SAT requirement for Fall 2021. Although most students are celebrating the cancellation of this dreaded standardised test, what they fail to understand is that it will only adversely affect international students. For the many students relying on merit scholarships to fund higher education in the US, this may serve as a disadvantage. Since the test is designed to assess students' college readiness, colleges will now be put in a tough spot when deciding whether an applicant is a good fit for their community. With such an important part of the admissions process being eliminated, admissions officers will now be placing more emphasis on school transcripts, official examination grades, extra-curricular activities and essays: parts of the application process international students, especially those from Bangladesh, often seem to overlook.

Instead, we place more importance on our board exams, ensuring that the results we get in our HSC, A Levels and other external exams are top-notch. For years, the college admissions process in the US has been praised for being a holistic one, so when the standardised testing part of it is taken out, students who have weak grades in school or lack sufficient extra-curricular activities worry they will not be able to boost their application with a high test score to make it as competitive.

On the other hand, there are those worried about whether universities will be sympathetic when assessing students' school performances. With classes being shifted online, teachers not being able to cater to students' needs and board examinations being cancelled, many find it hard to keep up their grades and wonder how universities will assess their performance. Students that were relying on O/A Level results to spark up their application now find themselves worrying about a grade that is not only out of their hands, but also may not reflect their full potential and wonder whether universities will even consider them as valuable representations of the student.

On the other end of the spectrum, Bangla medium students sit in uncertainty as they wait for announcements regarding their indefinitely postponed HSC examinations. Without these qualifying exams, they wonder whether their dreams of studying abroad will ever become a real-

ity. Although many universities are being lenient about final grades and accepting high school transcripts as final grades, others are not. Because many universities (particularly in the UK) do not recognise HSC as an adequate advanced exam, seniors in Bangla medium schools wonder how the admissions process will look like for them in the wake of the pandemic if they don't get to sit for their exams. Since they are a part of a small minority in the international applicant pool, they worry they may not get the chance to even put up a competitive application to universities.

For many others wanting to take advantage of this summer to boost their extra-curriculars and gain experience through internships, the chances of getting into a good college seems bleak.



On top of that, students now have to worry about whether they will qualify for sufficient financial aid to fund their education while having to pay full tuition. As the pandemic puts people out of jobs and drives businesses towards failure, many students worry if their parents will be able to pay the hefty fees that come with higher education abroad. Since an increasing number of students are likely to apply for financial aid next year, universities brood over whether they will be able to provide sufficient funds to incoming freshmen. And while many students planned to take a gap year to focus on boosting the extra-curricular aspect of their applications, the pandemic now makes them worry about whether they will be able to demonstrate to universities that they utilised the year to grow, learn and gain

experience when there are very limited internship and extra-curricular opportunities at their disposal.

For those that had their stellar applications accepted, the ban on travel poses a significant threat to their study abroad plans. While universities like the University of Southern California are going hybrid, conducting a small portion of their classes in-person and the rest online, others like University College London have plans of fully reopening this fall, with only classes hosting large populations being conducted online. This leaves students worrying about whether respective embassies will issue student visas in time for them to be able to start classes, while students who took gap years last year wonder whether they should run the risk of starting online classes with the threat of not getting a

to contract the deadly virus. Though many are choosing to start their university journey from behind their desks back home to save costs and stay closer to family during this unprecedented time, the drastic time difference stands to not only affect their sleep schedules but also their academics, mental health, and physical well-being.

"I have PCOS and my doctor said that maintaining a healthy sleep schedule is a must for me, but if my classes start at 10 PM and end at 6 AM, how do I manage that?" ponders Fahlia Raushan*, an incoming freshman at UCLA this fall.

As experts warn that social distancing measures may be in place well into 2022, students find themselves wondering whether their university experience will be a joyful one. Orientation week, traditional school events, packed classes and a

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The Gap Year Conundrum

SARAH WASIFA

If future me were to invent time travel, I would certainly come back to redo a lot of things. Maybe not glue myself to the floor, for starters, and definitely do the whole gap year gig differently. Life works in strange ways, and while I could blame my 12-year-old self for setting off the series of events that led to this predicament, there's little a 12-year-old isn't impressed by, and a passage in a certain book seemed to do the trick.

Gap years, contrary to what it is portrayed like in the media, is a consomme of two teaspoons of feeling lost, a pinch of a limbo, and a whole cup of learning how to be an adult, simmered till nice and clear. Real easy on paper, real easy for everything to go wrong.

Why you want to take a gap year is entirely up to you—maybe you need to stop yourself from the inevitable burnout, maybe it's financial, familial, or even wanting to repeat exams. While gap years, as a whole, are looked down upon in our country, they are in no way indicative of ineptness in any field. You aren't falling behind on any race, if there's even a race to begin with. If it's any consolation, tell yourself a productive gap year not only consolidates your university application, but also allows room for personal growth (the keyword here is productive).

Unlike other years, the uncertainty posed by the pandemic in current times has certainly got a lot of people rethinking their college plans, with many deferring their admission in fear of leaving the safety of sanitised, hand-washed homes. Even though gap years are rarely recommended, this year, there might be a lot more people on the same boat as you.

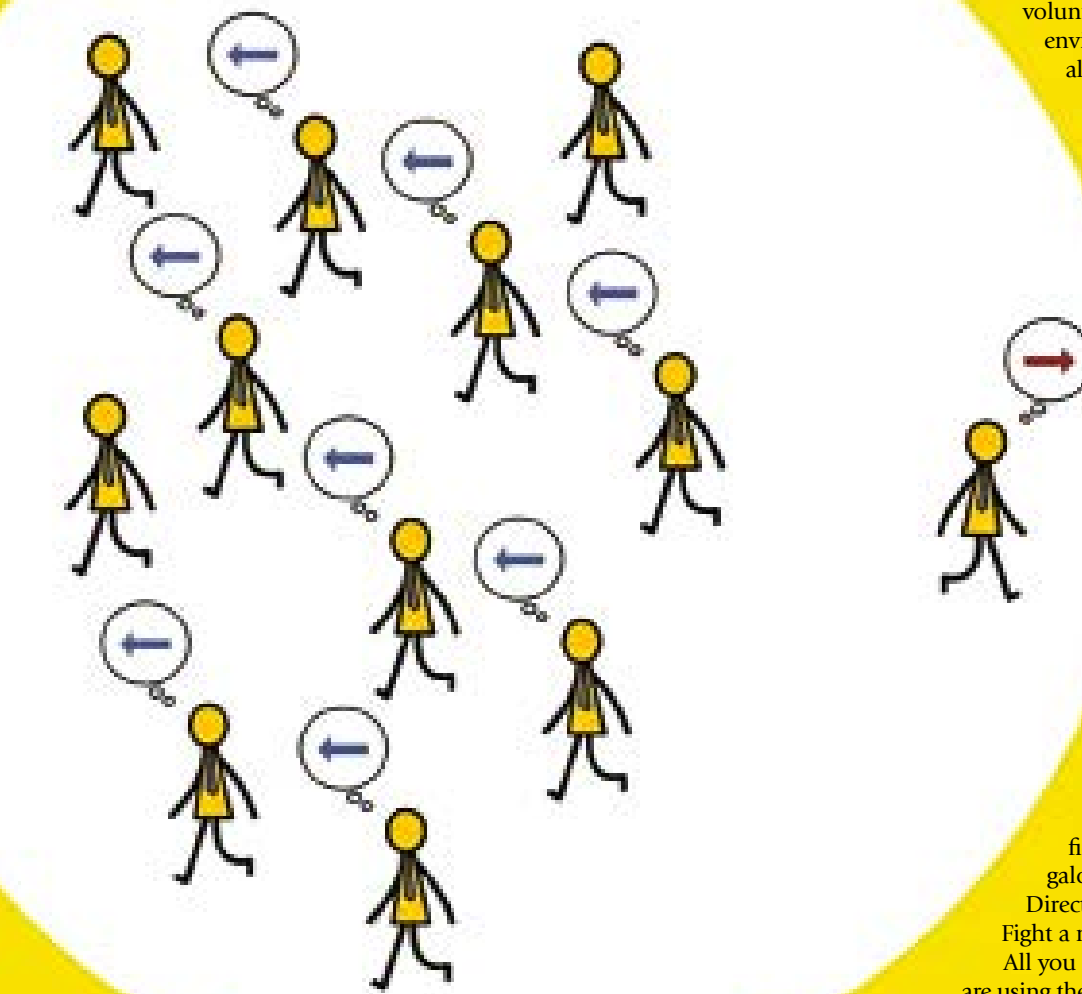
While you might have had this in mind for quite a while, nothing can prepare your parents for what seems like a summer vacation stretched beyond limit, that is, if you forget to tell them like I did. And there are valid reasons for them to be worried. Anywhere you look up, gap years will include one of three things: travel, working, or volunteering. Unlike our international peers, for us, gap years aren't itineraries detailing trips to Nepal, or volunteering to save Peruvian rainforests. While the very definition details working, few institutions in Bangladesh offer jobs to people straight out of high school. As for travelling, you're lucky if "Ammu, travel korbo" earns you anything other than a

*Names have been changed for privacy.

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trip to the kitchen for fresh, locally sourced thanda pani.

know at Crimson Cup. Days spent doing nothing



No matter what you've planned, your parents may not take this lightly. Try to catch them in a good mood. Tell them something good first, even though good news is scarce at times like this. Childhood memories always work. Maybe make them some tea (my fallback plan included a small bag packed with clothes and necessities, and a good pair of running shoes).

Given the current run of events, your chances of getting them to agree are either astronomical, or on the other side of zero. Chances are, they're facing the classic Bengali dilemma: what will people say? Lay out your reasons on the table; be transparent. Tone down the drama and speak your mind. They will come round.

It is very easy for your mental health to deteriorate in the span of this year. The switch from the sheer chaos of HSC or A Levels to a stasis can give quite the whiplash, and falling into the pit of procrastination is easier than finding someone you

aren't exactly brain food, after all. Your friends may be moving abroad, making new friends in their new places, and there is an overwhelming sense of being left behind.

Coming back to books and studying after these 12 months with the same enthusiasm as before might be hard enough even without the stress of levelling up into college.

Even above all that, the excruciating wait for the admissions decisions is not really something to look forward to. Especially not when you're locked inside your own home, alternating between worrying and Netflix. Definitely not worth the stress.

Let's say you're taking a gap year, or have slipped unknowingly into one. Walking out of your exams, you will definitely want a break, but treating your gap year as a yearlong break could prove to be problematic in the long run.

If you're someone with many faceted

interests, a gap year is the perfect time to try your hand at everything. Depending on the availability, while a job may be on or off the table, internships may be an option. Check if your school hires fresh graduates as intern teachers, or if possible, ask your teachers to help in your hunt. Non-profit organisations, volunteering, or getting involved in environmental, social campaigns all look good on an application, and you'll be getting the benefit of the whole experience.

Take the time to rack up skills that will prove to be assets to you. If research is more your thing, online research programmes are best bet you got; some even offer college credit. A friend of mine took Intro to Psychology and Python on Coursera, another learned Python on MIT-OCW. As for volunteering, virtual volunteering—tutoring, writing letters, petitions, social campaigns—can safely and effectively allow you to do good. You could even become an entrepreneur. You could become a fictioneer on the platforms galore, maybe even start a blog. Direct a short film. Build a rocket. Fight a mummy.

All you have to do is make sure you are using the time you have constructively.

While the main stigma surrounding gap years is that it is a whole year wasted on things that aren't "valuable", you will benefit from seeing it as a time to work on yourself, taking a step back and considering what you want. Weigh the academic, social and mental health benefits as well as the invisible backpack of little lessons to learn, or in this case, teach yourself. Even if you don't want to take a gap year, at the very least, consider the value it might add to you. At the end of the day, it's a choice you're making for you. It is really easy for you to get the idea that this year is going to be hard and that it would seem like forever, but honestly, time flies. It is, in the end, just one year. When you're ready to write the next chapter of your life, you'll be ready. Fingers crossed.

Maybe I should have listened to myself and made them tea.

Sarah Wasifa sees life as a math equation: problematic, perhaps with a solution, and maybe sometimes with a sign to tear off a page and start over again. Help her find 'y' at sarahwuf77@gmail.com