

Switching Academic Goals

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Commerce or Science? When choosing subjects for our first board exams, and consequently our future careers, are we really confined to those binary alternatives? Or are we allowed to cater to our curiosity and select a concoction of different subjects, or have a change of heart down the road?

Amidst a whirlwind of hormones, anxiety and acne, the tender age of 14

"The hierarchy is Science > Commerce > Arts. You can switch from left to right but not in the opposite direction. But almost always NCTB will select the subjects for you. Also, not many colleges will allow you to cherry pick your subjects from different groups. For example, I wanted to take Statistics instead of Biology in H.S.C but the college I'm enrolling in won't let me. Bangla Medium students can switch to English Medium, but that brings with it a host of other problems to the table," says Safayet Islam Anonno from St. Joseph Higher Secondary School.

might not be the best time to choose our potential careers. Regardless, we are ladled with a difficult choice between the business or science stream for our S.S.C/O-levels and are told these two are the only forks in the road and there's no allowance for backpedalling. By choosing one path over the other we are closing the door to all other possibilities.

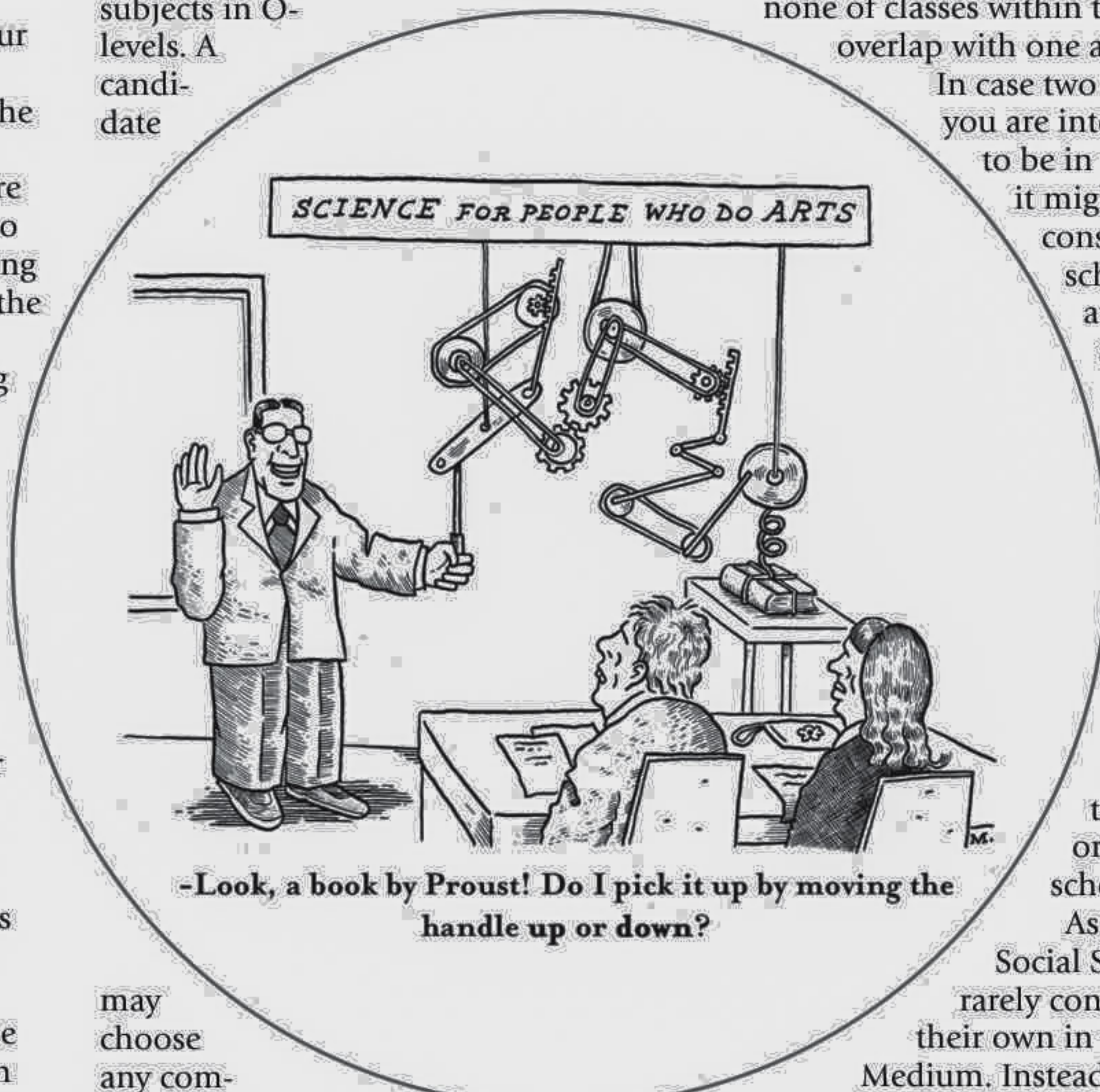
For Bangla medium students seeking breathing room, the circumstances look somewhat bleak. They have limited flexibility when it comes to choosing subjects, with their options restricted to the usual conventional streams consisting of predetermined subjects. With no leeway with the number of subjects you could take either, the only choices afforded you is whether to take Higher Mathematics or Computer Science, and which subject between Biology and Mathematics to make optional. And since candidates largely take the same stream in H.S.C as they took in S.S.C, there's no room for second thoughts.

All is not lost, however; you might be able to switch your academic streams in university. Many students in IBA, for example, hail from the science side of the coin and such is the case for many business programmes in the country. Students generally find it much easier to switch from science to business rather than the other way around. Therefore candidates are encouraged to choose the science stream if possible because of all the options available to them. Arts students



face grim prospects as they find it next to impossible to study anything outside their respective groups.

Fortunately for English Medium students, their positions are much more pliable. Schools normally allow 5-14 subjects in O-levels. A candidate



may choose any combination of subjects that suits their fancy. Restrictions imposed on the maximum or minimum numbers of subjects allowed are primarily done by schools to avoid scheduling conflicts and to ensure quality.

Taking too few subjects leaves your full potential untapped, may tarnish your school's image and limit your opportunities in the future. Take too many and you

risk biting off more than you can chew. Also, with schools offering so many subjects, it is almost impossible to avoid scheduling conflicts across the board. Instead, they choose to split the subjects into science, business etc. and ensure none of classes within the same section overlap with one another.

In case two of the subjects you are interested in happen to be in the same timeslot, it might be possible to consult with the school to let you attend classes in another section, or even study one of the subjects at home or a coaching centre. You can even take the O-level subjects in different sessions, which would relieve the pressure of taking too many subjects or overlapping schedules.

As for Arts or the Social Sciences, they are rarely considered a group of their own in the English Medium. Instead, many schools offer such subjects as extras that students can take to augment their selection of primary subjects. They are often seen as 'filler subjects' – an easy way to achieve an extra A.

A popular misconception prevalent among O-level students and their parents is that A-level subjects have prerequisites. For example, some believe that to take Physics in A-levels; one must have

"The flexibility the English Medium system allows us, paves the way for us to sate our intellectual curiosity and prepare ourselves for our individual ambitions. But people rarely take advantage of that; instead they choose to draw out their exams. They split their O-levels and A-levels into 2 sometimes 3 even sittings. They waste valuable time so that they can give exams more comfortably," says Raiyan Mahbub, a recent A-levels examinee.

Additional Mathematics and Physics in O-levels, a notion that is sometimes incorrectly fostered by the teachers. Although it is certainly much easier to complete an A-level subject if you had the same course in O-level, it is not mandatory. You may take any subject in AS-level without any prior experience with it earlier. Generally, A-level curricula cover O-level material in the first few chapters, albeit in more depth and at a much faster pace.

So depending on the education system you study under, it may be relatively easy or virtually impossible to switch academic streams in school. But that does not mean one cannot have a change of heart and pursue a new passion. It is not unheard of for one to switch to a completely different course in university.

Something to keep in mind is that generally it gets increasingly difficult to change tracks without consequence the further down the road you are. It may be possible, but not always practical.