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NEXT STEP

LOOKING BEYOND THE FIRST HURDLE

What to do when your plans for undergrad don't go right

There are 40 public universities in Bangladesh, a couple of international universities, and 92 private ones (as of February 2016). Between themselves, these universities provide a vast array of degrees and courses. Whether or not those numbers are enough is a fact up for argument, but it is true that an overwhelming majority of the 800,000 students who passed through the proverbial sieve at HSC target only a tiny fraction of those available university seats for higher studies.

Some want to go to a specific university, while some want to study a specific subject, but most fail to reach this target. The whole ordeal leaves a considerable amount of students disappointed and unsure of their immediate future. Many seem to forget that there is more than one way to achieve a certain academic target; as long as the aim is something objectively valuable, i.e. a degree, and not a superficial concept, like the "status" that comes with a certain institution. This article discusses some of those options.

The first thing to tell oneself in this difficult situation is that an undergraduate degree is only the stepping stone to the vast sea of higher studies. For instance, an undergraduate degree in the applied field of a science discipline wouldn't necessarily mean that one's education will be shackled in those specifications for the rest of their lives. In Bangladesh, job opportunities and lack of research facilities drive students away from the study of pure physics, chemistry, mathematics, etc. Students with a passion for these, who'd otherwise excel in these fields, are instead driven towards their application sides, to engineering and technical degrees, some are even driven off course towards a whole new discipline. But the pursuit of your dream doesn't need to be over, if you make smart decisions at an early stage. As long as one's undergraduate degree is closely related to, and shares necessary coursework, with their final aspirations, there's nothing stopping them from taking that path for a postgraduate degree, followed by a career.

A common and much treaded path in this regard is the jump from applied science degrees and even engineering degrees to pure physics, chemistry or math. A degree in pure chemistry, on the other hand, can potentially open doors towards higher studies and a career in pharmaceuticals, which should be good news for anyone with dreams of studying pharmacy who hasn't been able to get in. Similarly, a degree in any of the pure disciplines will open possibilities towards a postgraduate degree in the applied fields. Changes from botany to microbiology, biotechnology or even nanotechnology are some of the possibilities.

But what about someone who doesn't have a clear idea of what they see themselves doing in the future? Maybe it's not a



ILLUSTRATION: EHSANUR RAZA RONNY

clear picture, but a person usually does have a sense of what they're good at and what they're bad at, and in many cases this helps them decide a career path. Pure subjects, like physics, chemistry, finance or economics give you the most room for pivoting later on. The drawback to these options is the fact that top grades across board and a considerable portfolio of work done in the target field are often prerequisites to a career.

Beyond these practical issues, there are often the sentimental issues of not being able to get in to one's university of choice. Dhaka University, BUET, IBA and public medical colleges are some of the names that'll induce a pang in the hearts of many. But the fact of the matter is, the degrees that

these universities provide are very rarely institution exclusive, and if one is brave enough to truly devote themselves to their passion, they will find that many universities are waiting with open arms to welcome them. The expense that comes with private universities is a matter of concern, but many universities offer waivers to students with a certain academic pedigree. North South University, for instance, gives out waivers to students who achieve top ranks in their admission tests.

I want to end this article with the story of Dr Sufi Mostafizur Rahman, Professor of Archaeology in Jahangirnagar University. In 2000, he led the team that discovered Wari-Bateshwar, an archaeological site in Narsingdi that dates back to 450 BC. He

made one of the ground-breaking archaeological discoveries in the last couple of decades, but many years ago, he had travelled to Dhaka to become a doctor. His story starts as a dejected undergrad student of history in Jahangirnagar University, until a visiting professor from Cambridge kindled his aspirations in archaeology with tales of Wari-Bateshwar. His story of success may be difficult to emulate, but it just goes to show that undergrads only scratch the surface of an academic life that may turn out to be completely different from the one presumed.

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THE BOSSMAN

BY E. RAZA RONNY



PLEASE DO NOT WRITE ANYTHING ON THESE PAGES
ALL ANSWERS MUST BE GIVEN ON THE ANSWER SHEET

HONEST ADMISSION TEST QUESTIONS

Number of questions: 4
Time: 10 minutes
Negative marking: Yes

1. Are you equipped to handle an excessive amount of stress?

If you thought getting in was the hard part, you're in for a ride, my sweet summer child. It is our specialty to make sure that our students have daily mental breakdowns, if not hourly.

2. Do you truly believe that you can sit on the green fields of our campus and enjoy some quality time with your multicultural friends?

We don't have multicultural students, or green fields. This is a lie designed by capitalists to lure you in.

3. Are you ready to make some enemies?

Your classmates will laugh at you if you mess up even once, and they'll be jealous if you do better than them.

4. Would you mind learning your entire course syllabus from YouTube?

We're severely understaffed so we can't provide competent teachers in the classroom. You must have a good internet connection that allows you to watch Khan Academy videos on the morning of an exam without buffering.

University admission tests in our country are like battlefields. This arduous process leaves you questioning everything. You find yourself wondering whether all this was actually worth it.

If you cannot relate to the aforesaid statements, then kudos to you. You're one of those rare specimens who have got life all figured out. Not belonging to this rare species, I was presented with a rather unprecedented conundrum that surely a lot of other students are facing right now. This conundrum presents itself in two forms—a sweet dilemma where you get into all the elite universities of the country and have to choose one, or the less pleasant one where you don't get in where you wholeheartedly wanted to and need to pick a field which is still pretty good but not your first choice.

This decision seems easy enough: go for whatever you had planned before sitting for the tests. But that's exactly where the problem stems from. Very few things in life go according to plan, and even more so in a society where we are riddled with preconceived notions on education. We learn that science is good, arts and humanities are bad. We confine ourselves in a way that we are either ill-informed or misinformed about what culminates from the degrees.

I had never considered pursuing anything other than science, but a lot of things changed while prepping for engineering schools. I realised that it wasn't

Should I really study this?

The post-admission conundrum

I sat for admission tests back in 2014, and things were no easier for me than they have been for you in 2017. Everyone told me to study engineering or medicine. Some told me to study business. Some advised me to study abroad. No matter where I went, there would be 50 relatives ready to smother me with advice on how I should live my life. But all I could do was spend sleepless nights, bloated with caffeine and trying to figure out what I wanted to do with my life.



what I wanted and that made all the difference. I decided to enrol in a business school instead, which turned out really well for me considering my personal growth.

The key is to be self-aware. You need to assess yourself before you can make a concrete decision. There are three important things you need to keep in mind: your personality type, interests and your competencies. For example, I had my epiphanic moment when I realised I was

decent with numbers but not good enough. In order to well in engineering, I would have to put in many extra hours just to produce a half-decent result. So I decided to go to a good business school which would allow me to work with numbers in a moderate dose, but would also leave me with enough time to explore ECAs.

Ask yourself what truly interests you and what your long-term goals are. Subjects like medicine and law demand

heavy reading hours and real. The key to success in these fields is perseverance and slave labour—if you don't want to put in that effort, then you'll get frustrated by the pressure. The same goes for subjects like CSE, as writing codes relentlessly can get very tedious. If you are someone who is more career-oriented you could pick one of the business departments. On the contrary, if you think less objectively and want to research, you can go for either science or humanities depending on your area of interest. However, if you are still unsure of yourself, the best option is to enrol in universities which allow you to pick and choose different subjects and let you dip your toe in. Public universities chain you down with pre-selected subjects so enrolling in private universities or applying for scholarships abroad is the wiser option.

The secret to academic excellence is not where you get in; it is defined by your conviction. If you take an active interest in the field you choose and commit to it, you don't have to get accepted in the top public universities. It all comes down to what you make of your opportunities. So my advice: stop looking for which is the best department; instead study what interests you and it will bring out the best in you.

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