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The high price for a foreign degree

This is the second article focusing on the Bangladeshi students caught up in the TOEIC cheating scandal in the UK. More than 30,000 foreign students, including Bangladeshis, accused of cheating on their English language tests, had their visas revoked between 2014 and 2016. Their rights to study and work in the UK suspended by the Home Office.

MALIHA KHAN

Farzana Bobby returned to Bangladesh two years ago, after a harrowing experience in the UK where she went for higher education. She had spent the last eight years struggling to receive a quality education there.

Her journey to the UK started in 2009, fresh from completing her HSC exams here. The first from her family to go abroad for higher education, Bobby did not know exactly where she wanted to study but was just able to convince her father to pay to send her to the UK so that she could get a much-coveted overseas degree. She doesn't recall the name of the Dhaka agency she went through, but told them that she wanted to study law.

"The agency told me that a business degree was in session soon and that I would be able to change my subject once there, it wouldn't be a problem," says Bobby, whose family is from Dohar, to the south of Dhaka district. "At the time, I didn't know how these things worked and knew nothing about London. A friend lived there, so I said I wanted to be admitted to a university in London."

The agency assured Bobby that she would be studying at a college in London but once in the UK, she found that she had been enrolled in the University of Bedfordshire (in the county of the same name, more than a two-hour commute from London). "When I got to the university and said that I don't want to study business but law, they said you can't change it. They told me if you

want to change you have to go back [to Bangladesh], re-apply and then come back."

Deciding that was not an option but feeling unsafe commuting back and forth from London, Bobby enrolled in another college. This however drew the ire of her parents, particularly her father, who had already paid in full for her studies at Bedfordshire, according to her agreement with the agency back in Dhaka (which received a commission from the university in exchange).

Around that time, Bobby's new college was one of many institutions closed down in a crackdown by the British government. Between 2008 and 2009, 'bogus' colleges which were unaccredited and with no proper facilities, were shut down and the Home Office tightened immigration rules for students. Foreign students with Tier 4 visas, who were assured that they were studying at good institutions in the UK, were left in a scramble to get admitted elsewhere so that they could continue their studies and get their visas extended.

Then the TOEIC cheating scandal hit. Bobby was one of the students accused of cheating and her visa extension, and thus studies, held up indefinitely. Bobby insists she didn't cheat. "Why should I? I had given my IELTS in Dhaka before I came and got a six [scores are between zero and nine] back then. Since then, my English has only improved."

Bobby's education had kept getting stalled and this accusation was the final

straw, less than a year shy of graduating from college. At the same time, her family finances weren't in great shape. In such a situation, Bobby did not tell her parents the extent of her legal situation—that her home had been raided and she interrogated, that she was unable to study indefinitely, and that she now had to regularly report to an immigration centre. That she had nowhere to live because her flatmates were scared of further Home Office raids.

"I wasn't being able to explain my legal problems at home," says Bobby, referring to the around 60 lakh taka her father paid for her studies and living costs in the UK over eight years. Her father had sold off property to send her abroad initially. Her

parents didn't speak to her for some time, she says, and their relationship has never recovered though she now lives with them.

As she tried to handle her situation—applying for a judicial review of her case by herself, without legal support—while staying with friends or in shelters and no studies or job on hand, Bobby went into severe depression. "At one point, I became suicidal," she says.

The story of the legal fight of these students, including many other Bangladeshis, has been the subject of media coverage in the UK for some time now. Some students were deported, others eventually returned because they did not have the means to fight their case and stay on in the UK, while some still brave the fight against the UK Home Office.

Back in Bangladesh, the plight of these students is little known. Many of the students went through recruiting agencies which sent them to the UK, not knowing which college or university they would be admitted to, the quality of the institution, and little about their rights in the UK. Much like migrants, students such as Bobby (and their parents) paid a steep price based on little or incorrect information of where they were being sent.

"Of course, a student should know where they're going. When I got to London, I felt like I had been dropped in the middle of the sea and I don't know how to swim." Bobby's agent no longer responded when she called from the UK.



A Bangladeshi student participates in protests led by a multinational students' platform against the Home Office decision.