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NEXT STEP

Perfecting the personal statement

Your stepping stone to the university of your choice

Making the decision to study abroad for tertiary education and going through the actual application process can be very stressful for Bangladeshi students. The personal statement or the essay that they have to write for admissions purposes is one of the most important elements of this process where many university admissions officers in countries like the UK, USA, Canada, Australia, and Japan use it to make their final decision for the shortlisted candidates. This is why MACES, a leading study abroad consultancy firm in Bangladesh realises the importance of getting students to practice writing such statements as it launched its upcoming 4th Annual Personal Statement Writing Competition 2019. Last year, eleven A-level schools from Dhaka and Chattogram participated in the event including DPS STS, Maple Leaf International, and Presidency International with registrations exceeding five hundred.

In order to help students prepare for the competition, MACES has invited Mr. George Casley, Academic Director of CATS Education, Cambridge, UK, to conduct workshops on personal statement writing. Educated at Dulwhich College, Bristol, Kings, and Oxford, George has had an illustrious career spanning thirty years that involves teaching and advising students on higher education, as well as training teachers on relevant spheres. He is an advocate of transnational education who believes that individuals are "better together" and that recognising similarities and cherishing differences result in communities thriving. After successfully leading schools in the UK and being a university academic, George joined CATS to develop staff and give higher education advice. As the academic director of CATS Education, he regularly visits all the CATS schools and works with senior staff to ensure that the CATS students can be their best selves by progressing to their preferred universities.

We sat for an exclusive interview with Mr. George Casley, where he talks about the importance of the personal statement in the application process for the UK and US, as well as shares insight on how students should go about deciding what to study and where.

What role does the personal statement play in applying to top universities?

In the UK, the personal statement is a key part of the UCAS application for most top universities. Departments and colleges of universities use them differently and students receiving expert advice in UK schools can tailor their statements appropriately. Even in the US, it is of vital importance and is one of the many more pieces of writings that universities often collect from prospective students.

Do personal statements help in obtaining scholarships?

In the UK, scholarships are rare. However, in the US, the personal statement can influence the awarding of scholarships.

What advice would you give to students looking to study in top universities?

Top UK universities are most interested in how you think and learn in your subject area. Therefore, to prepare for your applications, first and foremost, read around your subject. Start with the 'Very short introductions series' from the Oxford University Press Website. Use the excellent bibliographies you can find there to deepen your questioning of topics that interest you.

Secondly, question ideas and assumptions and come to reasoned conclusions.

> As a teacher, I look forward to enabling people to be creative, imaginative and argumentative. However, learning is a lifelong process and I am here to learn too.

Talk with your friends about your subject – ask them to challenge your thinking.

Finally, look at the course outlines and apply for courses (not universities) that inspire you.

Top US universities are also interested in you as a whole person and your leadership, interpersonal and emotional skills, alongside the contribution you can make to their community. Therefore, to prepare your application, beyond having an outstanding academic record and being well-versed in all the tests and reading, you need to additionally have demonstrated and developed leadership skills; participated in, and learnt from volunteering; learnt from experiences and reading outside your subject area.

How do you think this competition can help students?

This competition creates a desirable difficulty. Writing a personal statement worthy of winning will be a challenge that encourages thought, analysis, and creativity. By entering into this competition, students are taking a risk- a risk that in being questioned about their ideas they will think differently; a risk that in exploring and making links between their ideas and motivations they will change their minds and courses of action; a risk that they will win and gain new opportunities.

How do students in the UK prepare for their university application?

Preparation is different in different schools. At CATS UK schools, we advise students to start looking at course outlines as early as possible. Once you know what you want to study, you should choose universities that suit your learning preferences and abilities. Having read vociferously around their subject, a good student will probably discuss about ten drafts of their personal statement with their adviser. It is a tough process to go through; encouragement and pastoral care are important. In US schools, it is even tougher as students make applications to individual universities (rather than applying to all five through one form in the UK). Many US universities also ask for essays, personal reflections, and many other pieces of evidence of academic and personal growth. Preparation has to start years in advance.

When is the time to begin preparation for writing the personal statement?

The right time is the moment the student knows the course that they wish to apply for. Students who have been well prepared at CATS usually start drafting them in the June before they apply in October.

What are some common do's and don'ts that students need to know when writing their personal statements?

This differs for the UK and US. For the UK, make sure to argue, analyse reading and demonstrate your abilities, while avoiding descriptions and flattery. For US, follow the instructions for each university and demonstrate your values and concerns, while not being too humble.

What are you looking to achieve by conducting these workshops in Bangladesh?

I hope to help people to think, analyse and question more. As a teacher, I look forward to enabling people to be creative, imaginative and argumentative. However, learning is a lifelong process and I am here to learn too. A good teacher should always learn more than they teach in the classroom, so I hope that I will go home having been inspired, challenged, and informed by every person that I meet.

THE BOSSMAN

BY E. RAZA RONNY

The need for being proficient in data analytics

Data analytics could be more important in organisations than a second language or even past work experiences. In the last few years, data landscape has seen tremendous changes. The world has moved away from a place, where data used to be hidden away to a point where it can now be harnessed by almost everyone.

Analytics is the ability to collect, interpret, communicate and use the patterns that appear in data to make informed fact-based decisions. It depends on the concurrent utilisation of operations research, statistics and computer programing in order to measure the execution in an organisation and improve performance.

Data has opened up competition in the modern business world. Companies and organisations want answers that are out there, waiting to be discovered, and the winners are those organisations that equip and educate their teams to find and share them. Data can no longer be confined to the IT department or technical specialists. As a result, organisations are providing self-service analytics tools.

With the increased use of technology, the sheer amount of data collected and stored throughout the world has made it imperative to know how to use it to our advantage in our career. This could help us move up the ladder by putting us ahead of the competition. The market success of companies is driven by analytics, statistics, data and probability that is designed to define and solve problems. It is anticipated that organisations will give more priority to the candidates with higher capabilities and skills in data analytics for employment.

It is not necessary for candidates to have the same skill levels as those of specialists, but some familiarity would be beneficial for them. Few ways to improve competence in data analytics are jotted down below.

BE CLEAR ABOUT THE DESIRED OUTCOME

Typically, analytics exercises are considered holistically and are mapped out with the end result in consideration. Data can be processed to address a wide range of situations or problems. So it is crucial to be clear about the desired outcomes.

ENSURE THE COLLECTION OF NEEDED DATA

There is an assumption that data is readily available to provide the desired answers. That is a misconception. Systems must be put to place first, to collect or generate that data.

UNDERSTAND WHAT IS POSSIBLE WITH THE COLLECTED DATA

The collected data should be used properly in order to ensure maximum efficiency. It is important to emphasise that the results generated from the data collected and the analysis made is not infallible.

LEARN THE BASICS OF A FEW SOFTWARE APPLICATIONS

In order to deepen the understanding of data analytics, it would be beneficial to learn the rudiments of at least one software application such as Microsoft Excel, Google Analytics Premium, etc.

The field can be quite intimidating but can provide a more pragmatic perspective.

NABILA HOSSAIN

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Making a DIFFERENCE

Bangladesh is rapidly moving towards middle income status by 2021. Our businesses definitely offer immense opportunities for the growing economy and this diversity needs a stage for the stories untold. See Bangladesh make its mark on the global map as Making a Difference brings you our proudest success stories from across the country.

Hiring education consultancy agencies

Application to foreign universities can be daunting and students often rely on agencies to guide them through the process. From researching scholarship opportunities to visa applications, they promise to assist students along the way. But many fall prey to false agencies that forge documents for admissions or visa-processing purposes, and as a consequence, get banned from applying for visa to their desired country. Here are a few things to know before you hire one.

CERTIFICATION OF ACTIVITIES

North American and European universities put heavy emphasis on extracurricular activities, and some agencies promise to acquire false certifications or recommendations from reputed professionals for these activities. This is an instant red flag about the agency's authenticity because universities have multiple ways to cross-check your achievements. If you lie on your resume and get caught, your entire application will become invalid.

GRADE EQUIVALENCY

Grade equivalency requirements often vary from region to region. Some agencies use one equivalency certificate to be sent to multiple universities. Universities also have varying requirements of what certificates they want. Some colleges in the USA only require high school grades for undergraduate admissions, whilst some require secondary school certificates as well. You should cross-check these requirements from the respective website of each university with your agency.

WRITING REQUIREMENTS

Universities have mandatory writing supplements so that they can get to know you as a candidate. It's best to not hire an agency that promises to provide these essays for you. It goes against the admission rules and also lowers your chances as a candidate. Usually, these essays are produced from a stock list and they change some minor details to fit your profile. Trust agencies who promise to guide your writing requirements with your profile in mind instead of those who promise to write them on behalf of you.

VISA APPLICATION

Agencies often connect with travel agents to assist with visa application. It is highly recommended by most consulates and embassies, that you apply for your visa yourself. If you are taking assistance, then double-check the requirements and the authenticity thereof for all documents produced by your agency. Submission of a wrong document can not only get you rejected but also earn you a ban from the respective country you are applying to.

NOSHIN SAIYARA

Noshin Saiyara is an aspiring conservationist, deluded into thinking that she can save the planet from dying. Reach her at nsaiyara12@gmail.com to bring her back to reality.