

Did the pandemic kill students' academic dreams?

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About halfway through March exactly a year ago, I made an assumption that went wrong like nothing else in my experience had ever gone wrong before.

Finals that covered a year's worth of content were a month away. I was supposed to complete revision while spending the larger chunk of my day outside. At the peak of my stresses, the announcement of school closure felt like the perfect solution. We would be obliged to go back to the normal routine after a short while, all caught up and well rested. Or so I thought.

The events that took place over the last year appear now to me to be blurry and overwhelming upon attempts to recall. Students in the national curriculum wallowed in painful uncertainty while the authorities decided when and how to take the HSC and SSC exams. Meanwhile, international curriculum students had to come to terms with the reality of predicted grades based upon the grades they received in mocks they took just as preparation for the actual exams.

Despite it being obvious upon observation that the vast majority of students had gone through some extent of mental struggle, I arranged a small survey to gain a statistical grasp on the magnitude of the situation, where high school students, aged 15-19, were asked a few questions assessing their mental health.

Sixty-eight percent of the 147 respondents expressed that they did not believe grades received through teacher assessment were fair, and 70 percent said they felt the need to lessen their expectations or goals regarding higher education. When asked how the system of online classes affected their mental health, over 90 percent shared that it took a turn for the worse.

The group of focus in this article aren't the kids who are prodigies or have superior intellect, but the ones who try and apply consistent effort into academics. Eventually, they become accustomed to a certain level of high achievement, which might get embedded into their identity (either due to their own assessment of self or the influence of people surrounding them). This almost always leads to the burden of heightened expectations looming over their heads. Along with that comes the tendency of tying academic performance with their sense of self-worth. When the system



PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

of effort leads to a proportional reward, and they've been accustomed to become disarranged during the pandemic, quite the mental chaos ensues.

Upon discussion with a few of these individuals, it was evident that unwillingness to study is just a small part of a wide spectrum of emotional challenges faced. Being isolated from peers was a major basis of anxiety. Feelings of being underprepared in comparison to peers were magnified as not being able to attend classes together meant how other people were coping or whether they were struggling too could not be seen.

My own experience consisted of constantly being in a state of painful confusion. After a few months of trying and failing to stay focused and motivated, I started to question my priorities. It took more willpower and effort to achieve a good grade than ever before. I wondered if it was worth it, whether this was what I wanted. When I tried to prioritise taking care of myself over keeping to the top of my coursework, my fall in performance seemed to take an even harder toll on me. Things seemed to get out of hand with me constantly comparing myself to my peers. My self-esteem suffered new lows.

Fayyad Ahmmed, a very ambitious grade 10 student of Scholastica shared with me quite a comprehensive account of his experience during the pandemic. He said, "The primary source of all dissatisfaction was the uncertainty of the situation. I discovered that I lost my ability to focus on anything. When 4 out of the 7 members of my household

got infected by Covid-19, I started to lose all hope. I started to lose myself, and thought that even if I could meet my friends again, I would not be able to connect with them anymore. I was probably straight on course to implode under my own pressures."

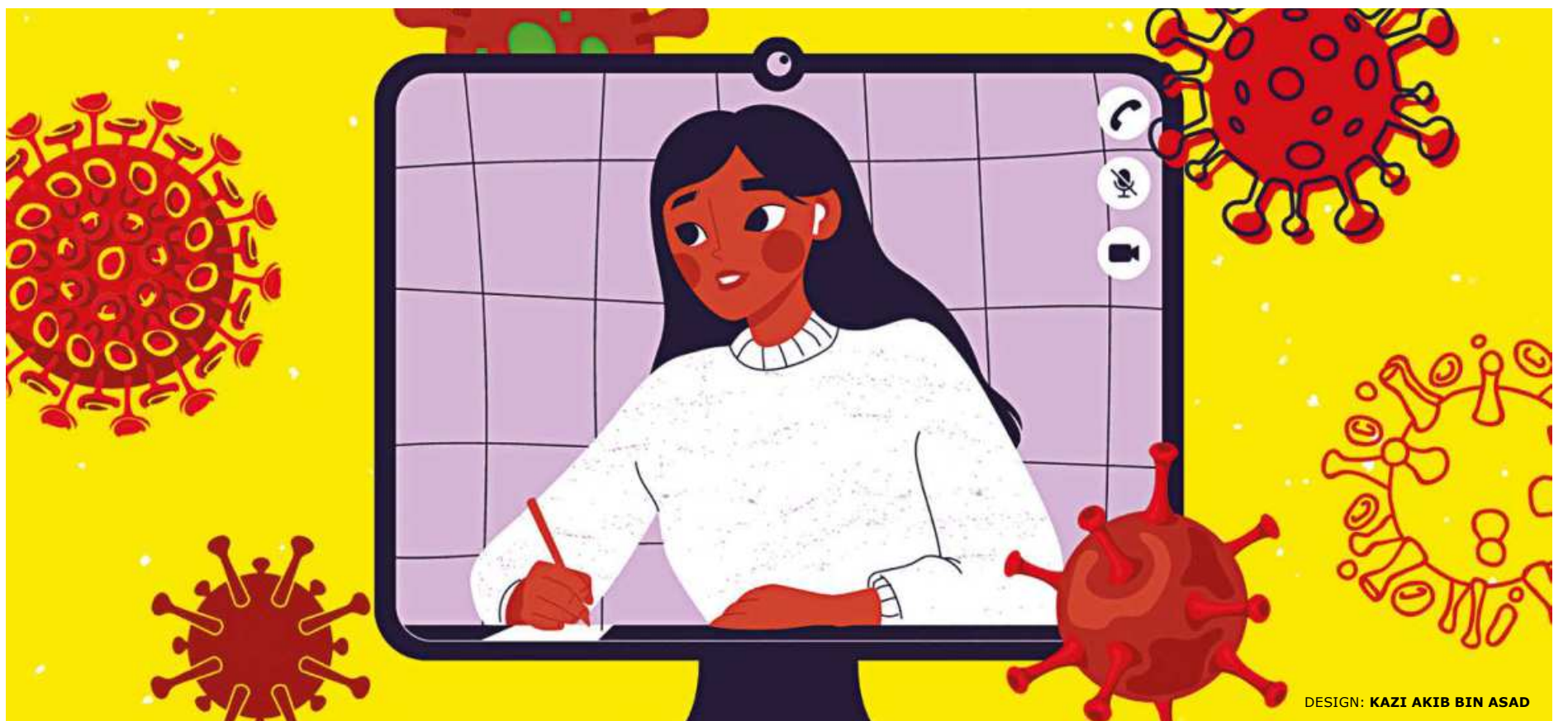
Abdullah Al Nafees, an SSC 2020 candidate from Sylhet Cadet College, thought that the situation needed to be handled in a way that was fair for all. "We did have online classes, but attendance was very low as a lot of my classmates live in remote areas with little to no access to the internet. Despite being driven students, many were left in the dark regarding preparation for SSC exams, with simply dropping out of school not being uncommon. Maybe schools should be opened for the kids who do not have the option of online learning," he commented.

The primary issue faced by all students appeared to be lack of proper atmosphere and the monotonous routine. Drop in grades led to renewed attempts to revive motivation, which eventually gave out not after long. Most experienced being trapped in an almost identical cycle of anguish.

The uncertainty regarding examinations provided added pressure to maintain good records throughout the academic term. Despite being faced with an abundance of challenges and a complete shift from the usual system of academics, many felt like they had only themselves to blame. A common sentiment was that not having to commute had provided a lot of time previously unavailable. Feelings of guilt for failing to use this time and further polish performance were prevalent.

The pandemic, despite being calamitous, brought something for everyone to learn from. Maybe for certain students, it was to not become too mentally invested in one aspect of life. Whatever benefits individual students have reaped from the pandemic, we can be sure that everyone is looking forward to attending long hours of physical classes at school once again, and will enjoy them when the day finally arrives. Merely a year ago, nobody could have seen that one coming, right?

Amrin Tasnim Rafa is always confused, it's literally her dominant personality trait. She challenges you to find something she won't think is confusing. Try your luck at fb.com/amrintasnim.rafa



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