

Look Before You Leave

QAZI MUSTABEEN NOOR

On a humid summer day, I had pretty much the worst breakdown of my life, that too at the bank. The teller gave me a look of utter nonchalance. Some puzzled onlookers muttered a comment or two. It was early April, just before I was to submit my visa application; I was already late. The ultra-slow, never-ending processes of the bank, the police station or the notary public were not helping at all.

Studying abroad is often seen as a means to ensure a rosy, idyllic little future — something that will magically take away all the stresses of life. Keeping up with all the preliminaries can weigh heavily on the applicant. It is easy to neglect our mental wellbeing with so much to do, so much going on. However, I will not be the one to say that this could have been prevented. The system has been designed as such, after all, that only the ones that can face the stress head on might prevail.

ABBREVIATIONS

Those aiming for grad studies start their preparations from their third year of university, while the ones going for undergrad start as early as Class 10. It takes a while to understand the buzz words; Common App, ECA, plus the various abbreviated standardised tests like SAT and TOEFL.

Soon after, one might discover themselves at a coaching center that claims to solve every study abroad problem if you just pay them handsomely. People are at least ten steps ahead of us at the coaching center, some kids look like the living embodiment of peer pressure. They cite this bhaiya or that apu's admission advice as if citing scholarly research. A friend who reg-

ularly maintains a bullet journal swears by the method to "keep track of what's what and when's what". For grad school, there is the dreaded GRE, which I never sat for out of fear of math. The friends I made during GRE coaching however, stayed.

TMI

When I finally settled down to apply for grad school and chalk out what to do, I realised something quite bizarre. There is a plethora of information available online, granted, but there is such a thing as an information overload.

For me, the primary source of anxiety was the sheer volume of info available on Facebook-based higher study groups. When I posted my very first, naïve and rudimentary question on the feed, a kind admin directed me to the group's files section. This is usually an extensive, exhaustive resource for anybody wanting to go abroad and realise their dreams.

However, not many on these groups want to undertake this labour. Many happen to be reluctant to check university rankings or their chosen university's websites. Hence, panicky questions like, "When is the deadline for X University's Computer Science program?" or outright, "What university is best for BBA?" Oftentimes, wrong information on these group posts do raise quite an outcry. Just before the application deadlines, I muted a few of these groups for self-preservation.

CHOOSE, MY DEAR

Elle Evans from *The Kissing Booth* truly had it all, with acceptances from both Harvard and Berkeley handed to her on a silver platter. Our financial situation would not allow most of us to even apply to these big-name

universities with miniscule acceptance rates. I steadied myself from the get-go, trying my best to focus on universities that would "have" me — the ones from which professors replied warmly, the ones that funded well, fared well but not too well.

The usual advice is to make it a mixed bag — pick two big-name universities, two mid-range and two "safe" or comparatively lower rank universities to apply to. If each university charges USD 80 on an average, the expense for application alone becomes USD 480. From this point on, before we even realise it, our choices become based on our money situation. The life of the international student is spent in working for some extra money and chasing items on sale, looking at fliers and getting that student discount on groceries, prepping meals with a limited budget and still eating healthy, combing thrift stores to find a warm winter coat, trudging through the snow, finding a job, any job. From this point on, we are always going to be thinking about money.

PAPERS

Breaking down in tears in front of some bored looking tellers is quite unlike me, usually, but the stress had been mounting for the last few months. The universities had made their decisions, I had completed the first step of the study abroad process — getting the letter of acceptance. The visa though, was a completely different matter. One needs at least twice as many documents to apply for it, and naturally, undertake twice as much stress.

I was at the bank to get proof of the fact that as a family, we are doing financially well enough to bear my expenses abroad in case my university funding stops for some

reason. I had been collecting documents, going to this office and getting that signature, all the while juggling studies and work. At the bank, the long lines would not let up, the people would not stop pushing, the fan would not work, and the bodies would not stop sweating. It was just too much; I had started crying.

PACKING

My world had to fit in two suitcases. I took just the essential clothes, maybe two sharis, some shoes and some stationery. Most of my hobbies, most of my collectibles, most of the things I love had to stay behind. After all, where does one fit their favourite conversations at their favourite coffee shops? Where does your cat fit? What about your favourite dish that only a loved one makes best?

The days of packing were spent in perpetual dread. I would pack a whole suitcase and weigh it painstakingly on our rickety measuring scale — it would almost always be a few kilos overweight. I would then dismantle the whole arrangement, open the bag and take a few things out. Later in the day, I would sit down and wonder, how easy it is to just get rid of things I had only moments ago considered essential! Shed some of that baggage if necessary, it is for the best.

Now that I am finally at my dream destination, a new set of problems breathe down my neck. There are more deadlines now, more studies, more chores. The dishes never do themselves, the fridge is hardly ever full. Life goes on, and making it here is only just the beginning.

Qazi Mustabeen Noor (she/they) is a PhD student at Queen's University, Canada.



ILLUSTRATION: KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

University or Program? The Choice Is Yours.

KAZI AKIB BIN ASAD

Which came first, the chicken or the egg?

We have been trying to find an answer to this question for ages now, and while some scientists may have come up with their own versions of the answer (is there a correct answer?), what's more interesting is the debate the chicken and the egg have created. On a very different note, studying abroad too raises some questions that warrant debate. After all, it's education; dreams are on the line, the future is at stake.

Do you choose a university or do you choose a program? If you have thinking about applying abroad, brace yourselves. You'll want an answer before you book that one-way ticket.

Spoiler alert, though. You already know the answer. But you need some insight to tell yourself.

What does it mean, by the way, to choose a university or a program? Let's look at two fictional examples.

Example 1. Samia. Ever since she learned about the University of Here, she's been fascinated by it. The university, one of the top ranked institutions in the world, is a dream university for many. Its reputation precedes itself; it's often referred to in pop culture and social media, not to mention prestigious conferences and events worldwide.

Anyone who attends the University of Here becomes Someone.

Example 2. Samir. During his A Levels, Samir developed an interest towards Physics, and wanted to become a mechanical engineer. He found that University of Here has an engineering program that has a department specialising in mechanical engineering, with favourable research opportunities and career guidance services. The professors are highly respected in their fields, too.

As you can see (and imagine), Samia is choosing the university, while Samir is opting to focus on the program. The choices, regardless of whether it's based on various parameters or simply their own personal choices, are their own. And there are merits and demerits to both.

The experiences of a student at an academic institution — be it for a four-year undergraduate program, a two-year Master's, or a PhD — are more than just the education in the classrooms. These years spent learning with friends, from teachers and mentors and living an independent life all on their own are arguably the most important years of their life. Therefore, it becomes crucial that these highly influential years are spent rediscovering oneself, building skills and preparing to take on the challenges of the world.

Why might one choose a university over a program? The reasons for this case are mostly general. Maybe the applicant prefers the location and climate. Maybe there's a chance at scoring a better financial aid package. Or maybe, like I mentioned, the name of the university is enough; the name will shine through the applicant's CV for the rest of their lives.

Another reason? "Dream university." Yes, I've had them and you probably have them too. Like a word in *The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows*, there should be a word for why many dream to get into a university, with the reason being "just because". Until then, we look at why one might take a program more seriously.

Truth be told, as we learn more about the application process and academic experiences, the benefits of choosing a program outweigh the reasons for the other option. One takes a deeper look into what is on offer in this case, going as far as communicating with faculty members and learning beforehand about the course curriculum and how it will impact their future careers. Many universities achieve their high rankings because of certain departments and programs, so one might want to read into that as well.

As mentioned, you will be surprised to find that sometimes it is a certain school

or department at a university that is more popular than the university itself. Take the higher education institutes in Bangladesh, for example. It's probably easy to say which university is the top choice for students, but when it comes to picking a business degree or an engineering school, or perhaps liberal arts, it's a whole different ball game.

If you do find yourself trying to answer this question, here's a pro-tip: Get in touch with the students who are studying what you want to study, and at the university where you plan on applying. Nothing beats talking to someone who has been in your shoes, has made a decision and is experiencing what you will in the coming years.

Ask them why they chose the program, what classes they enjoy the most, what you can and can't do at the campus, how do they spend their free time (free time? They'll ask), how do they manage finances, what the job situation is like — ask them about everything; ask them about life. They'll know.

Choosing to study abroad is perhaps the biggest investment for a young person. It goes without saying that the decision requires the perfect balance of an applicant's wants and needs, paired with knowledge and determination. Whether you pick a university, or prefer a program, make sure you make the most of it.



ILLUSTRATION: JUNAID IQBAL ISHAMM