

The alternatives to COACHING IN A LEVELS

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For most A level students in Dhaka, attending coaching classes is an immutable part of day-to-day life. School itself lasts from morning till afternoon, and a quick lunch later, they may well find themselves toiling about in one of the many coaching centres in our localities. Many of them spend hours stuck in snail-slow traffic, commuting from one centre to another or perhaps to their homes after a tiring day.

The ever-increasing workload accompanies them there as well, where they must not only prepare for school tests but also the ones that lie waiting at the various coaching classes they attend. Stress, exhaustion, burnout, and the like often end up becoming their closest friends, though they are far from being helpful ones at such a critical juncture of one's life.

"I found coaching to be extremely draining," says Shamsad Jahan, an A level student at Mastermind English Medium School, Uttara. "Without proper rest, I was pushed to the limits physically and mentally."

"Teachers often waste time at school to influence students to join their coaching classes. Coaching classes also tend to be longer and unlike schools, they also take mock examinations regularly, which has a tremendous impact on your grades."

Shamsad quit her classes afterwards and feels that her grades are not worse for it.

The high demand for coaching is perhaps a by-product of the perception that schools are not doing enough to support exam candidates. Taysir Rahman, an AS level student, agrees with this. He says, "Teachers often waste time at school to influence students to join their coaching classes. Coaching classes also tend to be longer and unlike schools, they also take mock examinations regularly, which has a tremendous impact on your grades."

However, Md. Nihal Abrar Rashid, an A level graduate who achieved five A*s for his examinations, believes that extra classes are unnecessary. He says, "The most important thing for me was identifying my weaknesses and working on them. For that, I went through lots of past papers and graded myself according to the marking schemes. Writing down my mistakes and going over them using the coursebooks was crucial to my improvement. If there was anything I couldn't grasp, I'd simply look it up online. There are lots of great online resources for that."

According to Ishmam Said Rahman, a private candidate who did not attend any school or coaching classes at all, yet still managed A*s in all four of his subjects, the first step is "to know what to know".

"The syllabus is something that I used extensively throughout the entirety of my A-Levels," he says, "I planned out which chapters to cover and scheduled when I'd cover them. As for how to learn the content itself, the textbook is always your best friend."

However, it is rare to find people who have the patience and willpower to do so much on their own, and that is why coaching exists in the first place – to fill the gaps that the majority of students cannot on their own. But is this really the only way?

In 2022, eight A level students from Mastermind English Medium School founded a nonprofit organisation (NPO). Of the original founders, four have gone on to study at some of the best universities in the world, including the likes of Cornell University and Stanford University. The NPO, however, has grown to include the most talented people from Mastermind School and beyond. Notes, lectures, and past paper-solving videos uploaded by them on YouTube and Facebook were of tremendous help to many candidates sitting their exams in the 2023 May/June A level session.

Fahim Mosharraf Ratul, a freshman at Haverford College and one of the founders of the NPO, says, "It started when we asked ourselves one simple thing about coaching classes – are they really worth all the hurdles we have to face? The material and knowledge they provide are definitely valuable, yes, but are they exclusive? Not at all. Everything you need can be found on the internet or from your seniors. The problem is that these are all scattered, and people are intimidated by that. We realised that if we could just gather it all in one place and streamline the learning process, we would be saving ourselves and many others a lot of money and trouble."

In the end, students themselves may be the answer to their problems. Fahim agrees with this sentiment. He says, "A vibrant, self-supporting community of students is what is really needed. A hive of minds that engages with itself, where knowledge and study material pass freely between those who have it and those who need it."

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SELF-STUDY TIPS

- A portion of the day should be devoted to revising notes and solving question papers. These are essential to clear the concepts and enhance critical thinking skills.
- The topics to tackle can be divided according to their difficulty levels, starting with the toughest ones first as they need the most time and effort to fully master.
- Solving question papers will be a big part of the self-study drive. They allow students to get familiar with the question pattern and the answering techniques examiners expect them to display.
- Getting proper rest is essential for performing well in exams.

