

■ STUDY ABROAD ■

The unseen challenges of STUDYING ABROAD

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You've done it. You're in your dream country, studying your dream subject, at your dream university. And you live happily ever after...right?

Unlike our rose-tinted ideals, studying abroad is very challenging. However, it's difficult to predict a lot of the hurdles that come with being an international student while living in our familiar bubbles.

The first challenge students face is taking care of oneself. Hrishik Roy, a first-year student at Dartmouth College, says, "I found it difficult to get used to doing my own laundry. I had zero clue that different clothes need different settings on the machine and that you can't dry sweaters in the maximum dryer settings because then the sweater shrinks. So, a lot of it is trial and error."

Another unprecedented challenge is retaining energy after completing your daily chores. By the time you're done with grocery shopping, cooking, cleaning, etc., you might be too drained to get started on your academic work. "I was fortunate to have learnt some culinary skills before coming here, but for those who don't have practice, cooking a chicken curry can take up to four hours, which is time you can't spare. In those moments I realised how privileged I was in Bangladesh to have food ready on the table after coming home," says Zahin Yasar, a third-year student at the University of Texas at Arlington.

However, not everyone's experience with these challenges is monolithic, as there's room for adaptability. Zahin says, "You slowly get used to this life and it teaches you how to be organised. Now, I don't just organise my room but also my lab equipment." So, hearing about others struggling with specific tasks or challenges shouldn't necessarily deter anyone from applying.

But no matter how well you take care of yourself, sickness is an inevitable reality of the human condition. However, procuring healthcare, particularly health insurance, can be a massive hurdle for many students. Hrishik says, "For a lot of people who go to state schools, you don't get financial aid, so you pay insurance out of pocket." Shayor Ahmed Khan, a freshman at UC Berkley, also points out that even having insurance isn't always reliable. "Sure, insurance covers a lot of medical costs, but I think most students are unaware as to how much it covers and under which circumstances."

Hrishik adds, "When you're studying abroad, you have friends who will check up on you, but that's about it. You still have to go to classes and do the things you're expected to do because you're in an environment where no one else is ready to take care of you."

Studying abroad also means leaving behind your school friends in search of a new community,

which can be daunting. When asked if he feels a sense of disconnect with his peers, Shayor opines, "I think language is a significant barrier for a lot of people. In my case, it's not so much an inability to converse in English, but rather my choice of words being drastically different from those of my peers. The big issue is the culture shock which manifests in part because of language, but mostly due to differences in what people value."

Money management can also become a real problem. As an international student on a limited budget, you need to plan your finances out to the last penny. "I worked in some fast-food shops at minimum wage, which helped me cover my living costs. But it was physically exhausting and led to me doing badly in academics," recounts Radia Waziha, a fourth-year student at the University of Calgary. "I treat myself occasionally, but even then, I end up spending \$30," she adds. Travel costs, groceries, and stationery all pile up to lighten our wallets substantially. Hence, keeping track of daily expenses goes a long way in saving.

Adjusting to the new currency system is another barrier students often initially face. A common pitfall is mentally converting foreign currencies into taka to assess if it's worth the purchase. "A Starbucks drink costs around \$3 or \$4. But in my head, that's 400 taka, which is too much

for a drink right now," says Zahin. "This was part of the reason why I found it hard to befriend my classmates in the beginning, as they would always chill at restaurants. Luckily though, I got an on-campus job and got used to the system".

More importantly, the college degree for which we're sacrificing so much is ultimately a means to an end — usually a good job, research position, or a dream start-up. But it's not enough to just attend lectures and maintain a good GPA. You need to diversify your talents, build a network, and figure out your niche; tasks made all the more difficult when doing it in an entirely unfamiliar country from scratch.

Tasriqul Islam, a consultant at VTE Group in Dallas, Texas, sheds some light on how to approach this predicament. "The first task is to figure out which career path you want to pursue — talking to seniors in the same line helps. In order to break into the echo system, networks are essential. I participated in organising job fairs at my campus and got to speak with the HR teams of many top companies, which helped me build personal relations." He further elaborates, "Here in the US, recommendations and references are very powerful and only given to hardworking individuals with potential."

While being an international student does open doors and provides opportunities, it's still a difficult life to live. And even if operating laundry machines never cease to be a chore, the least we can do before rushing to the airport is to be mentally prepared for what is to come.



ILLUSTRATION:
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