

Choosing friendships over academic prestige when applying abroad

There's a spectrum of universities in every country, from well-reputed ones that only accept the most decorated applicants to others that still offer high quality education while accepting students who didn't prioritise academics as much in high school. This means that even if you're particularly ambitious, you don't have to choose between academic prestige and long-standing relationships.

ARANYO RISHI CHOWDHURY

University admissions season usually has us bawling our eyes out as we leave our old lives behind. We confront feelings of grief and loneliness as we realise that our friend group is breaking apart, with some of us leaving for distant lands. While applying abroad, however, we tend to develop tunnel-vision on university rankings and prestige because we perceive these as indicators of how instrumental the institution will be in making us successful moving forward.

It feels only natural to prioritise prestige while making everything else secondary. It's what everyone – from teachers and family to even friends – tells you to do. However, it seldom occurs to people that the bonds we've forged till now, that have had years of effort poured into them and have invaluable shared experiences inextricably tied to them, are something that should, and likely could, be carried with us into adulthood.

The idea of applying together with friends feels far-fetched. There's this narrative that going

somewhere academically prestigious trumps everything else

when applying abroad, including going somewhere close to where your companions are going. Thus, most people don't try to work towards the latter. However, achieving a combination of the two might be easier than you think.

There's a spectrum of universities in every country, from well-reputed ones that only accept the most decorated applicants to others that still offer high quality education while accepting students who didn't prioritise academics as much in high school. This means that even if you're particularly ambitious, you don't have to choose between academic prestige and long-standing relationships. You can keep both. And that's something that could turn out to be really helpful in the long run.

The great thing about applying abroad with your friends is that you will definitely find options in the same country or region that suit your individual student profiles while making it possible for you to meet up relatively frequently. Vast places like Australia or Europe are also great for this because travelling across cities or countries is really easy due to the efficient and accessible public-transport system. Even if they live really far away, you can still probably meet them halfway in two hours by train. Being well-researched about part-time jobs and scholarships will

also make your individual financial burdens lighter. And applying to the same places will make that research easier since you have more minds working together

the way of life and/or the language can be deeply isolating. Most people initially struggle to make friends in this scary, new setting. Coupled with the pressure to perform well in the new academic environment so your parents' money does not go to waste, it can be really hard to cope.

Having your close friends around can really help in adjusting with this drastic change. You've built these connections over years of spending time together at school, coachings, or any number of other places. Settling into a new environment is not just easier with companions nearby, but it also deepens those already strong bonds.

Bringing your support-system with you to a foreign land not only means you don't have to build one from scratch, but it also ensures the support system will be more effective because these people will have an easier time relating to you. Tirades about the culture shock, the things you miss back home, and the struggles you're facing while trying to integrate will sound much more coherent to them.

Ranting about board exam PTSD or reminiscing about diarrhoea-inducing street-food will feel that much more worthwhile with someone who has lived the same experiences and been surrounded by the same culture. As this person comes from the same background as you, it will be less difficult for you to find solidarity in your struggles with them. Moreover, rituals of spending time together with them just wouldn't be the same through Zoom calls without that physical proximity.

Comparatively, you wouldn't miss out on too much by deprioritising the brand value of the school you go to. Most of the time, people use ranking systems like the QS World University Rankings to define prestige. Even if these are somewhat

accurate in gauging relative prestige, the difference between going to a top 200 school and a top 300 school isn't that significant in terms of career prospects, especially in STEM fields where the work you

do after graduation determines your trajectory much more than your school's reputation.

All of this is to say that compromising on some of your lofty academic aspirations is certainly worth sustaining these relationships that could last a lifetime. In the distant (or very near) future, when you're feeling lonely or discontented, you might find yourself wondering what institutional prestige ever held over emotional intimacy.

on the same goal. Even if all this seems too cumbersome for a weekly hangout, just remember that small meetups can end up meaning a lot in the context of studying abroad.

Leaving behind everything you've known for the past eighteen years and being out by yourself in a country where you're unfamiliar with



ILLUSTRATION: **ADRITA ZAIMA ISLAM**

Aranyo Rishi Chowdhury is a graduate of S.F.X. Greenherald International School.