


EDUCATION

The role of ECAs in SECURING FUNDS for graduate studies abroad

ILLUSTRATION: ABIR HOSSAIN

FARIHA LAMISA

Back when I had just gotten into university, I was advised by well-meaning seniors, classmates, and acquaintances to be involved in extracurricular activities (ECAs). The motive behind the advice was nothing but noble, as all of them believed that in order to have a shot at securing a potential scholarship or funding as a graduate student abroad, my involvement in ECAs would help.

It cannot be denied that exposure to extracurricular activities can help an undergraduate student explore their interests while also providing other benefits. However, the notion that involvement with extracurricular activities makes one eligible for graduate funding is hardly the truth.

In 2023, Sajid Hasnat received the Center for Growth and Opportunity (CGO) Fellowship to pursue a Master of Science in Economics degree at Utah State University. As an undergraduate student of BRAC University, Sajid was involved with multiple extracurricular activities. According to him, however, it was his academics that played the most crucial role in his profile rather than the activities. Sajid said, "I scraped off all my ECA achievements and only kept my research and academic engagements in the application."

Nonetheless, the experience may not be entirely similar for most prospective graduate candidates.

Jumana Akhter Tanuja, who received the Excellence Scholarship & Opportunity Programme (ESOP) from ETH Zurich Foundation in 2024 after finishing her undergraduate education at Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET), thinks that although academics may have played a key role in securing the scholarship, her extracurriculars also helped.

"Professors in STEM fields tend to focus on your academic and research capabilities first and foremost.

Having a strong academic CV always comes first. Once you check the primary boxes with great academic results and research activities, the selection committee might then look at what else you bring to the table. This is where extracurriculars come into play. You need to present your extracurricular activities in a way that demonstrates your versatility," she said.

"On the other hand, an applicant can also show their commitment to the programme purely through exceptional academic achievements. Ultimately, the choice between these two approaches depends entirely on the individual, their strengths and weaknesses, and the specific programme they are applying to," Jumana explained.

However, Tahsin Tabassum, who completed her undergraduate degree in English at East West University and received a Global Academic Excellence International Scholarship in 2024 from the University of Adelaide for a Master of Education (MEd), says that CGPA was enough to partially finance her graduate studies through scholarship.

She said, "In my case, I received a scholarship based primarily on my CGPA. While extracurriculars are beneficial, they're not always required. For some funding opportunities, a strong GPA or academic focus can stand on its own as a significant asset."

Furthermore, Jumana warned against joining multiple clubs simply for the sake of quantity in the extracurricular field. "Spreading oneself too thin across many clubs without meaningful contributions might actually work against you. What truly matters is the quality of your involvement and how it aligns with your overall interests and goals. If you actively participate in one or two clubs that resonate with your interests and aspirations, it can make a significant difference – not just for a graduate application, but also for your overall career preparation," she stated.

Nevertheless, each scholarship has a different set of

requirements. For some, extracurricular activities may play a role. However, unlike undergraduate admission decisions, where significant achievements in an extracurricular field could compensate for an academic lag, it may not be the case when applying to graduate schools.

Sajid said, "Your CGPA, standardised test scores, research work (publications or honours theses), and letters of recommendation should matter more than anything else. I think that's true for a large majority of programmes. It also depends on which country you are applying to."

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Of course, for disciplines that focus on creative fields, like Visual Arts or Journalism, having a good CGPA and test scores alone might not be enough. These programmes often require you to have a solid portfolio of your work and, in some cases, work experience as well. For such programmes, ECAs do matter as these activities can help you meet the requirements.

Despite these differences, one thing can be inferred: if an undergraduate student is aiming to study abroad for a graduate degree with some financing from the university, your CGPA will matter. While extracurricular activities may be important, it tends to play a secondary role in the case of graduate studies.