

EDUCATION

UNLOCKING OPPORTUNITIES

as a high school exchange student



ILLUSTRATION: ADRITA ZAIMA ISLAM

PUNOMI RAHMAN TITIR

In Bangladesh, foreign exchange student programmes are still a relatively novel concept. Providing unparalleled gateways for broadening global perspectives, these programmes enable young people to immerse themselves in vibrant educational settings and diverse cultural environments. An exchange year abroad lets students unlock a world of opportunities, conquer new challenges, and build friendships that last a lifetime.

For high schoolers, the concept of spending an academic timespan overseas may initially seem daunting. However, stepping into a new atmosphere beyond one's comfort zone fosters internal growth in ways that may not be possible in familiar surroundings. From cultivating a sense of independence early in life to honing problem-solving skills in real-world situations, high school exchange programmes provide a unique learning opportunity that develops self-confidence and character.

"Seeing my school seniors return from exchange programmes with a transformed outlook on life deeply inspired me," says Sarika Saiyara, currently a gap-year student and an alumnus of the Kennedy-Lugar Youth Exchange and Study programme. "The programme was fully funded, allowing me to experience living in the United States – something I could have never afforded otherwise. The journey offered an incredible opportunity to broaden my perspectives, both academically and culturally, while fostering greater tolerance and understanding of different customs and values."

Sarika continues, "For instance, my host parents had a completely different outlook on life – they were hunters. That was definitely a hard blow. However, accepting parts of their tradition and perceiving life through their lens taught me a lot. My time spent with them felt somewhat bittersweet. While cultural differences made

my connection with them challenging, they were always kind and welcoming and made sincere efforts to have me involved in family activities. Over time, I came to value the unique dynamics of our relationship, gaining valuable insights into another way of life."

Iqbal Samin Prithul, a former exchange student under the Asia Kakehashi Project, shares a glimpse into his unique experience while studying at a Japanese high school during 11th grade. While some students were placed in dormitories and others stayed with host families full-time, Prithul was fortunate enough to experience both.

"Although I stayed with three different host families, I grew attached to one of them. I spent the entire winter and spring vacations with them; they even invited me over on weekends. They were incredibly welcoming people and I could talk to them about anything without having to feel embarrassed. Even now, we often communicate through video chats, where I can savour long conversations in Japanese. I can't wait to meet them again."

He further adds, "Living in the dorm was a bit challenging at first, as it was my first time staying by myself. As punctuality is highly valued in Japanese culture, there was a strict schedule with set hours for showers, wake-up calls, sports nights, and meals. However, the constant company of friends was great – I could hang out with them anytime. Both experiences – living in the dorm and with host families – were enriching, but connecting with my long-term host family felt truly special."

Students enrolled in exchange programmes usually attend a host institution in the designated country, where they learn to adapt to a different education system. There is an emphasis on extracurricular activities and community involvement, encouraging students to connect with their peers beyond the classroom. In contrast to Bangladesh, where opportunities for young

people tend to be limited, with schools often failing to incorporate anything outside textbook learning, exchange programmes provide individuals with an excellent platform to enhance their non-academic resume.

Prithul, also an alumnus of the U.S. Department of State's Community College Initiative, says, "As long as I kept up with classes, the programme allowed me to travel extensively within the U.S., thanks to a generous stipend and a good deal of independence. I especially enjoyed volunteering, which is uniquely integral to American culture and made for some unforgettable memories. Additionally, I completed a three-month internship that helped me grow professionally and even led to a remote job opportunity in the U.S. after I returned home."

For Sarika, the experience contributed profoundly to her artistic journey. She recalls, "My exchange year ignited my passion for cooking, which blossomed while volunteering at the local teen centre. Food became my comfort space while coping in a new environment. Besides, I initiated an after-school Bangladeshi dance club, introducing my peers to traditional folk dances. I was also honoured to be the only student receiving a full-ride merit scholarship to the Music Conservatory of Sandpoint to study Western classical music – undoubtedly one of the coolest experiences I got to encounter as an artist. Additionally, I had the privilege of performing Bangali folk songs at a school concert, a first for my host community. Ultimately, your exchange year is what you make of it."

Besides exposure to vast opportunities and scope to improve networking, exchange programmes have more to offer to high school students. Farhana Amin Ripa, also an alumnus of the Asia Kakehashi Project, reflects, "The most important part of my experience was perhaps the early exposure to an independent life. Living on my own and connecting with people from diverse backgrounds made my world feel so much bigger at that stage in life."

Farhana acknowledges that the cultural differences were initially overwhelming as she knew little about life in Japan. However, determined to make the most of her experience, she chose to approach it with an open mind by embracing every opportunity, from festivals and events to new foods, completely submerging herself in the culture of a foreign country.

High school exchange programmes are widely popular in many countries across the globe. However, in Bangladesh, we often fail to recognise the need to explore opportunities outside academia and don't acknowledge the value of global connections.

"The lack of access to information about opportunities, compounded by the conservative mindsets of parents, creates barriers for students applying to these exchange programmes. Guardians often have reservations about sending children abroad because of safety concerns and uncertainty regarding where they'll be placed. Such concerns lead to fewer students applying. However, this narrative is slowly shifting, with more and more students applying each year, as thousands compete for limited spots. This reflects a growing awareness about the purpose of exchange programmes for personal growth and global exposure," concludes Sarika.

Titir is in hate with her student-self these days. Be kind enough to send her some condolences at punomirahman@gmail.com