

SHOULD YOU CONSIDER PURSUING AN ONLINE DEGREE?

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At present, online degrees are becoming more an attractive option to many students, especially to those looking for flexibility and affordability. While this mode of higher education is still new in Bangladesh, it is slowly drawing attention.

Online degrees offer the freedom to study from anywhere, often at a fraction of the cost needed to pursue the same degrees in person from traditional universities. More importantly, they let you gain real-world experience while still in university.

We reached out to three students, all of whom have experience in pursuing online degrees, to hear what they have to say about this mode of higher studies.

Faizah Lubaba Shristy, who began her online degree in Computer Science at the University of the People, said, "During the Covid-19 pandemic, most public and private university admission exams in Bangladesh were suspended. Besides, the tuition fees for a Computer Science degree were high, and I did not want to take out a loan that could lead to financial strain. I had good grades and a clear goal to earn a degree that would help me pursue meaningful work or entrepreneurial ventures in Bangladesh."

Sharmin Akter Jany had studied Management at a university in China for two years before the pandemic changed her plans. "A friend recommended that I consider an online degree. Studying in Bangladesh would have meant starting over and spending another four years at university. In contrast, online education was a more efficient and practical solution for me, as a four-year degree can be completed in as little as two and a half years."

Prasun Bipra, who is attending an online BSc programme in Data Science and Artificial Intelligence at the Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati, said, "I chose the degree because Data Science, which I wanted to pursue, is not widely available as a major in Bangladesh. Also, it gives me a lot of flexibility to learn at my own pace while maintaining other commitments."

For all three students, affordability and time are major factors as to why they opted for an online degree. Regarding the affordability aspect, Bipra said, "My degree costs roughly around BDT 4.5 lakh. The fee is paid in instalments, so I do not feel much pressure."

Jany enrolled in a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration, consisting of 40 courses, at the University of the People. "Each course usually costs around USD 120. There is a USD 60 admission fee, but sometimes it is waived. I was fortunate to receive a full scholarship from the beginning, so I did not have to pay anything at all."

Scholarship support also motivated Shristy to continue her degree. "We only pay an exam fee and there are no admin or book fees. I received scholarships which covered

most of my tuition fees. The total cost of my degree was around BDT 5 lakh, but because of scholarships, I paid around BDT 1 lakh in total for my full degree. Students have the scope to secure 70 to 80 percent scholarships in some online degree programmes if they can write a strong admission essay."

Apart from affordability, the flexibility offered in such online programmes is unparalleled. Traditional in-person classes see students spending hours commuting to and from their universities. For those pursuing a degree abroad, the logistics are even more difficult – from relocating to a different country to adjusting to the culture there. Besides, in-person classes also restrict students from attending to other activities, including part-time work.

The flexibility of online education, however, eliminates most, if not all, of these problems. As the classes can be attended from anywhere remotely, the need to commute, relocate, or sacrifice part-time work opportunities is no longer necessary.

Besides, as Shristy points out, students are granted free access to various premium tools and resources that help them with their courses as well as academics in general. The faculty members' diversity in these online programmes also add value to the studies. "Our faculty members come from around the globe like India, the US, Africa, the Middle East, and so on. As our university is accredited by WASC – the same prestigious body that accredits Stanford – the standards are world-class," said Shristy.

Adding to this, Sharmin said, "The teachers are very supportive. If I ever receive lower marks, I can talk to them and they will look into the matter fairly. We also have a personal programme advisor who responds to our queries within one to two days."

An online degree does not mean the academic standards are any lower. Apart from being accredited by various councils and institutions, the faculty members at these programmes maintain integrity and stick to certain standards.

"Teachers mark according to detailed rubrics, and any shortcuts, like using AI incorrectly, can result in academic misconduct. Everything has to follow proper APA citation rules, and only scholarly, reputable references are accepted," said Shristy.

All that being said, online learning comes with its own challenges.

"Staying motivated while studying online takes a personal commitment to excellence," said Shristy. "I know deadlines are coming, and with no room for extensions, I have to approach my work with dedication and perfection. There's no second chance – if you miss a week, you fall behind."

Bipra added to this, saying, "While you can study from

anywhere, online degrees also require a lot of self-discipline and time management since there are fewer face-to-face reminders or interactions with teachers."

Besides, when it comes to online degrees or education, concerns surrounding isolation and missing out on campus life are always there. "At first, I did feel a sense of isolation, wondering if I was missing out on the traditional university experience," said Shristy. "But over time, my priorities shifted. I needed to work, not just to be another graduate in Bangladesh, but to truly grow. I gained real-world experience, explored fellowship programmes, and also ran a business that funded my education. By my fourth year of studies, I had no regrets."

Bipra pointed out another drawback, "What I hate is the complete lack of interaction with the institution offline. Students might feel a bit isolated because they do not meet classmates in person, and group activities or discussions can feel less engaging through a screen."

He added, "In-person university offers a more traditional experience where students go to a campus, attend live lectures, and meet their classmates and teachers face-to-face. It is easier to make friends, ask questions immediately, and join clubs or events. The environment feels more social and active."

Despite the isolating academic experience, people pursuing such online programmes manage to find community in their own way, as was the case with Jany. "Even though we do not have the traditional campus life, it never felt like anything was missing. We build connections virtually through peer discussions, private messages, and feedback on assignments."

The shift to online learning also transformed how they approach education. Shristy now follows a fixed routine, usually studying from Thursday night to Saturday night. Jany, on the other hand, believes that online learning made her more disciplined and helped improve her research and time management skills.

Still, a major challenge remains, which is perception. "Some people still think online degrees are not real or that you did not earn them properly," said Shristy. "But I was lucky to work with people who understand how times are changing."

Shristy did face some pushback. "I did have one tough experience, where an interview for a role questioned my online degree, and they seemed shocked by it." Despite that, Shristy went on to do an internship at Chaldal and is now working there full-time as a product operations associate.

Bipra too believes that online education has a strong future, but not without limits. Jany agrees with this, saying that attitudes need to change. According to her, many people still do not understand how structured or credible online education is. But once they learn more about it, their opinion usually changes.

