

The O/A level conundrum

STAY IN SCHOOL OR OPT FOR PRIVATE REGISTRATION?

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Every single student is familiar with the ordeal of having to sit for board examinations. However, a question that gets thrown around often in the minds of English medium students is whether they should sit for their board examinations as a student of the school they have been a part of or as a private candidate.

To work out the right answer to this concern, we must first ask: why is it that students feel compelled to opt out of school and take either one or both of their exams as a private candidate? For some students, staying in schools seems like a safer route as it offers structure, a sense of community, access to extracurriculars, and even familiarity. On the other hand, there are others who leave school due to personal, financial, or academic circumstances. Regardless of which route a student chooses, the next step for students is to pursue higher education.

Farzin Rahman Esha, who sat for her A levels privately, left school in the eighth grade and later studied at the Institute of Business Administration, Dhaka University (IBA). She noted that her parents had her leave school because they assumed extra coaching classes were a necessity, even though she was already enrolled at school.

"We weren't financially solvent enough then to afford both school and coaching classes, so we decided that it would be best for me to sit for my O and A level exams as a private candidate," she recounted.

Despite facing some hurdles when registering for her exams, she noted that leaving school granted her benefits later down the line when she had been preparing for the IBA entrance test. She said, "When it came to university admissions in Bangladesh, I feel like there wasn't much of a difference between a student who graduated from a school and me.

At the end of the day, we had essentially studied under similar syllabi, whether it was

from school or not."

"Once I had settled on the idea of staying in Bangladesh, I began preparing for my IBA admissions. I feel like my time as a private candidate played a huge role in making me more disciplined when it came to studies. It helped a lot, particularly in university, since I had the habit of pushing myself to study (even when I didn't want to) and working independently," she added.

Rifah Tashfia Islam, a former private candidate and currently a student of North South University (NSU), recalled how it was the distance from her home to school that compelled her to leave. However, it was only after she graduated that she began to encounter difficulties.

"Collecting and receiving my certificates proved to be a harrowing experience for me. I was informed that the server was down, which is why I didn't receive my final grades on time. Since I was a private candidate, I had to run back and forth to British Council Bangladesh, which took a toll on me, as the officials there didn't treat me well," she explained.

Fatima Rahman, who sat for her A levels privately and completed her undergrad at the University of South Wales in the United Kingdom, explained how the process was both difficult and rewarding for her, "Being a private A level candidate did come with some extra hurdles, but they were manageable with some planning. Since I wasn't enrolled in a school, I couldn't

rely on an institution to source my recommendation letters. Instead, I reached out to the

tutors who had taught me through private tuition. Since they were schoolteachers themselves and familiar with my academic abilities and work ethic, they were able to provide strong and personalised recommendation letters to support my applications."

"When it came to the application process, universities did ask for clarification about my status as a private candidate, which meant providing additional explanation and documents. As I could clearly show my results and demonstrate my preparation, it did not hold me back. In some ways, the experience made me more independent and organised," Fatima added.

In contrast, students who sat for their O and A level examinations from a school argue that it provided structure, but that didn't spare them from having to attend coaching classes.

Tarannum Afza, a former student of Bangladesh International Tutorial (BITL), who completed her undergrad studies from The University of Melbourne, Australia, elaborated, "Back in school, since teachers just stuck to the syllabus, there was really no room for applying creativity. Although we had access to adequate resources such as labs, we ended up neglecting our classes in school, as we were getting most of our work done in coaching classes."

"Sitting for A levels from school involved spending a hefty amount of money on tuition, which was a privilege I experienced. As I stayed in school, it allowed me to stay connected with my friends and participate in a bunch of extracurricular activities. However, when it came to applying to universities in Bangladesh, I think private candidates had the same advantage as I did," she added.

Nonetheless, Tarannum did mention that it was her alma mater that helped her gather recommendation letters and transcripts, which are a requirement when applying to schools abroad.

Robin Biswas, the Head of the Physics Department at Chittagong Grammar School, alleged that there is a misconception amongst both students and parents that the school is not doing enough to aid in the educational progress of its pupils.

"Financial constraints may serve as a hurdle for parents, but I would definitely recommend staying in school because not only will it help students remain connected to the school culture, but applying to a good school later for higher education will also require them to receive recommendation letters and transcripts, which the school they have been a part of can only provide," he asserted.

Biswas also added that when students apply to schools abroad, they need to showcase involvement in extracurricular activities, which demonstrate other skills and traits that they might have. To conclude, he emphasised that the manner in which schools tend to mould students involves structure, building them up for a better future.

How a student chooses to sit for their board examinations largely boils down to what route they prefer. Regardless of what a student opts for, they will need to account for their aspirations and how well they align with their current circumstances.

Afra is a finicky student of English Literature, who is always overworking to stop overthinking.



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