COVER STORY

What international exchange programmes offer to HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

RAMISA RUBABA RASHED

In an age of virtual connections, nothing quite beats the actual experience of forming connections outside of one's country. From Japan to the United States, international exchange programmes can not only provide high school students with first-hand immersion in culture but also become a medium for relishing the sweet flavours of independence and new perspectives. Beyond passports, plane tickets, and photographs lies the real promise of exposure: moving away from the comfort of your home at a tender age and learning how to belong somewhere unfamiliar, thousands of kilometres away from your country, while bringing back home a broader understanding of your own after the experience.

ASIA KAKEHASHI PROJECT

The Asia Kakehashi Project+ is a Japanese government-sponsored programme that brings high school students from Asian and G7 countries to Japan for approximately five months. Among the international exchange programmes available to Bangladeshi students, the Asia Kakehashi Project offers a particularly immersive experience. Rather than limiting cultural exchange to organised short visits, the programme places selected students in Japanese schools and host families or dormitories, and it allows them to take part in intercultural and leadership activities.

ELIGIBILITY AND APPLICATION

Usually, applicants have to be Bangladeshi citizens aged 15 to 18, have obtained a minimum of 60 percent marks in principle in all subjects in the latest examination at school, have an overall minimum average of 60 percent marks in all subjects over the past two years, have an interest in learning Japanese, demonstrate leadership potential, and have not previously participated in the programme. The application begins with a pre-application form. Eligible students are then contacted about the subsequent stages of selection, with shortlisted candidates proceeding to further screening.

INSIGHTS INTO THE EXPERIENCE

I had the opportunity to chat with Nabila Sara, an alumna of the Asia Kakehashi 2023-2024 batch. When asked about what made her apply to the programme, Nabila said, "I found the Asia Kakehashi Project through a notice posted on the iEARN-BD Facebook page, researched the programme, and when I realised I could study in Japan through a fully funded opportunity, I immediately started to prepare myself for the application process."

Nabila said that though the selection process went very smoothly, she wishes she had focused more on learning Japanese beforehand because it would have strengthened her application and, more importantly, helped her communicate and connect more deeply with people in Japan.

Discussing the most memorable part of living and studying in Japan, Nabila said, "My school is one of the memories I cherish most because everyone made me feel welcome. My teachers and friends always went out of their way to help me with my studies even though almost everything was in Japanese. I also loved joining the Aikido club and having lunch with my friends every day."

We then asked her if she faced any challenges adapting to life in Japan. We found an honest response: "The biggest challenge was communicating in Japanese, especially when I wanted to express my feelings but couldn't find the right words. I learnt to explain myself more carefully, use gestures and emotions, and ask friends who understood English to help me communicate; I realised that when you genuinely want to connect with someone, you can find a way to understand each other."

Looking back on the experience, Nabila agreed that she gained an experience through this programme which wouldn't have been possible only as a tourist. She got to experience ordinary Japanese life,





PHOTOS: **COURTESY**

stayed with host families, attended a Japanese school, and shared meals. "Experiencing their customs and everyday routines allowed me to experience Japanese life from a much more personal perspective, which I don't think would have been possible as a tourist."

KENNEDY-LUGAR YOUTH EXCHANGE AND STUDY PROGRAM

For students looking beyond the boundaries of their own community, the Kennedy-Lugar Youth Exchange and Study (KL-YES) Program offers an opportunity to experience American high school life from within it. This programme is funded by the US Department of State. Selected Bangladeshi students spend a semester in the US, living with host families, attending local schools, and participating in activities that bring them into closer contact with a global community.

ELIGIBILITY AND APPLICATION

Bangladeshi applicants must be 15 to 17 years old, enrolled in grade 8, 9, 10, or 11 in Bangladeshi high schools or colleges, hold Bangladeshi citizenship and residency, maintain at least a B average with no failing grades, and meet the programme's English and J-1 visa requirements. Applicants first complete the online preliminary application by the stated deadline, after which eligible candidates proceed through the programme's selection stages.

INSIGHTS INTO THE EXPERIENCE

In a conversation with two alumni of the programme, we received many insights into the real-life experiences that this exchange provides. Mehedi Hasan Rifat represented Bangladesh in the US for the 2024-2025 year and was placed in New Oxford, Pennsylvania. Sreyoshi Hasan, a current tenth grader in South Breeze School, went on the exchange as a ninth grader for the 2025-2026 year back when YES was a year-long programme. She expressed that upon learning about YES, she was taken aback by the alumni stories, grew curious to see if American high schools were like



the movies she grew up watching, and wanted to experience living in America as a teenager to fulfil her "American Dream".

The KL-YES Program selection unfolds over four stages across five to six months: a written application, a phone interview, the in-person English Language Test for International Students (ELTiS) test with three essays, then a group interview followed by an individual one. Each round raises the stakes, so by the time you're selected, you already know you've earned it.

When asked about what it was like attending an American high school, we got some interesting responses.Rifat recalled, "My first day felt like walking into a show I'd grown up watching: yellow buses, pep rallies, and football under Friday night lights. Academically, the freedom to choose stood out most, with the concert choir and computer science sitting right next to core subjects, almost like a small university. Between cross country running, swimming, tennis, and clubs like robotics and student council, there was barely a version of myself I didn't get to try on that year."

Just like Rifat, Sreyoshi's reply also heavily emphasised the opportunities that the school leveraged. "I was a part of student council, speech, theatre, band, and choir in my American high school, and each of those experiences taught me a variety of new things about leadership, teamwork, and commitment, and being around locals obviously made me challenge a few of my own personal viewpoints as well."

Sreyoshi then went on to reminisce about a memorable experience that changed her perspective in a way she did not expect: a road trip to Texas from Iowa she went



on with her host dad and exchange sister. She remembered, "From the deep, philosophical conversations to our unique ways of teasing each other and creating new inside jokes to breaking down in the middle of Oklahoma in the freezing December night, that road trip really was one of a kind."

Living in an American community may affect the way one understands their own identity. This was evident as Sreyoshi went on about the community she was placed in, "My placement was in the middle of a farmland that really prioritised the agriculture-based businesses, seeing as it was Iowa and we were surrounded by corn fields. Being around this environment really made me appreciate our own agricultural businesses and farmers even more. I felt more connected to my roots in a sense, because I was able to realise the lengths our farmers go to in order to bring us quality crops. I began to appreciate the chaos of Dhaka a little more in moments where the silence on Iowa was a little too deafening."

Both Rifat and Sreyoshi emphasised the diversity and global community that the programme comes with. Rifat shared how the experience helped him expand his worldview: "The bigger gift was the friend group, teenagers from a dozen countries swapping stories about home, which quietly dismantled every stereotype I'd walked in with. I left that year thinking in a much wider radius than I arrived with. KL-YES Program left me thinking internationally by default."

Sreyoshi talked about the grandeur of the alumni network she can now immerse herself in. She stated that amongst the US government exchange alumni, there is a huge network of people who are willing to help out with anything and everything whenever one may need it. "It has been really fun and exciting to be a part of them and have their support," she expressed joyfully.

After these conversations, one thing becomes clear: an exchange programme is rarely just about the country one gets to visit. Behind every itinerary are conversations, friendships, moments of unfamiliarity, and small discoveries that can stay with a student long after they return home. Nabila suggested that before applying, one should build adaptation, communication, and Japanese-language skills. Most importantly, "Be genuinely curious, be ready to step outside your comfort zone, and remember that the experience is not just about going to another country; it is about learning to understand people, cultures, and yourself in a completely new environment," said Nabila.

So, if you are planning to apply in the future, go with curiosity, embrace the unfamiliar, ask questions, make the most of every conversation, and, above all, enjoy every moment. You never know which one you will remember long after you return home.

Ramisa Rubaba Rashed is a born poet, daydreaming singer, stuck in the disguise of a wannabe biologist, and a full-time cat-mom. Send her your songs at raemsi.ruby@gmail.com.