**The admissions game**

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International applicants to post-graduate (PG) programmes (doctoral programmes in particular) at universities in developed countries have long understood that having even a single research paper to one’s name gives them a big leg up on the competition.

For universities, admitting international students that already have experience with the research, peer-review, and publishing process greatly reduces the risk of failure that they and professors take on. It also improves applicants’ odds of finding funding opportunities with research labs that can cover the cost of their education and living.

A few days ago, The Chronicle of Higher Education reported on the newest way to buy an advantage in college admissions in North America (‘The Newest Admissions Ploy,’ May 18, 2023). The trend of being a published author of a peer-reviewed paper even before entering grad school is trickling down to undergraduate (UG) admissions as well. One manifestation of that is a service named ‘Scholar Launch’. The service’s website claims it connects high-school students to professors at some of the world’s most prestigious universities, who hand them off to a research assistant and guide them through writing and publishing a “research paper,” all for a fee, of course.

As a result, students have their names added to the author list of a research paper. The real scholarly contribution by high-school students paying thousands of dollars to the conduct of any research is a question mark. Closing the loop of this ecosystem is a new crop of journals like the International Journal of High School Research which charges students ($250) to see their name in print – which means essentially that deep-pocketed parents are buying their children (co-)authorships on “research papers” that badge them “peer-reviewed authors.”

Admissions processes to universities in Pakistan have not changed much over the last three or four decades and are still largely based on scores achieved at the prior education level. More recently, they are coupled with test scores on standardized tests. We prefer to make decisions using point-based metrics because they are seen as fair, transparent, and more difficult to challenge than criteria that leave space for subjective judgment. Of course, this comes at the cost of eschewing a more holistic evaluation of applicants. But at a time when everyone fears being accused of corruption and having their reputation publicly dragged through the mud for tipping the scales in favor of some candidate at the cost of another long before any investigation even begins, no one is willing to take the responsibility of defending even minimally subjective decisions.

None of this is news, of course. Every year, a growing number of young Pakistanis is opting to move abroad for university programmes, both UG (Bachelor’s) and PG (Master’s and Doctoral). Fueled by the economic uncertainty at home, the torrent of emigrants from Pakistan has multiplied over the last few years. For many of them, getting an education in a foreign country is a first step towards legal immigration to their host country. Holding a qualification that is recognized and understood in their host country makes it easier to find employment and, in time, settle and start a life.

Universities in the developed world evaluate admission applications very differently from what we are used to, something aspiring international students from Pakistan ought to be aware of. The headline is that admissions criteria to universities in many developed countries allow admissions teams a lot more leeway in their decisions. Past success remains the best predictor for future success, which is why a preference for a track record of high achievement in high school/ university is a given.

Being a graduate of a high-school system that admissions teams are familiar with makes it easy for them to arrive at a fair decision. Unfortunately, Pakistan’s higher secondary school certificate (HSSC) is not sufficiently well known. This is where those who graduated from Cambridge and IB school systems have an advantage, one that is critical in applications to UG programs. UG programmes are often around four years in duration, generally offer fewer opportunities for scholarships to international students, and come with a high price tag. That is why the number of Pakistani students applying to UG programmes tends to be small.

Master’s programmes are shorter in duration – often between one and two years – and many universities have more financial support or campus work opportunities available for graduate students. For applicants with a bachelor’s degree applying to a PG programme, the importance placed on high-school systems is replaced by the reputation of the university they earned their previous degree from. A top-grade from a university providing a steady stream of students that successfully graduate is viewed very differently from a top-grade from a university that is unknown and one the admissions team has never encountered before.

However, admissions teams go beyond this and consider a holistic picture of applicants. The applicant’s personal statement is a key piece of the application that provides the narrative, the big picture of who the applicant is, what motivates them, what their goals for the future are, and how the educational programme they are applying to will enable them to achieve those goals. It walks the reader through the applicant’s portfolio and weaves their influences, experiences, achievements, and choices into a coherent tale.

I recently talked to members of a foreign university’s admissions team about applications they see coming out of Pakistan. What I learned was that, although the requirement of a personal statement is well-known in applicant circles, they continue to underestimate its importance to admissions decisions. It is an opportunity for applicants to demonstrate their ability to reason, convince, and communicate with clarity of thought, abilities that are highly valued in all programs of study, both STEM and non-STEM.

To get this crucial piece right, in recent years, those fortunate to have the resources in Pakistan have been hiring the services of college admissions consultants that have cropped up in major cities. Available services vary widely from identifying universities appropriate to a student’s caliber and area of interest, assisting applicants with writing personal statements, creating a supporting portfolio, and guiding them through the visa application process. Service charges are in the range of a few thousand dollars.

Among the most basic types of evidence and experiences that make up a portfolio are internships. Internships entered the Pakistani academic lexicon in the ‘90s when a new breed of universities introduced a different academic culture. Once again, those with resources can afford to take unpaid internships or charity work and cover the expenses that incurs.

International travel and other experiences that connect to the narrative in the personal statement are yet another ingredient. Think of a trip to Kennedy Space Center in Florida to support claims of one’s interest and dedication in a mechanical / aerospace engineering program.

Another noticeable new trend of the last few years are pop-up charities / NGOs of high-school students. Often these entities come into existence to arrange a single event fit for a photo-op, just enough to support a round of admissions applications, and then never heard of again.

Closely related to the above is the tale of the high-school entrepreneur. Friends and family in one’s social circle ‘buy’ to create a reportable sales volume as a show of support, and then the business shuts down as soon as acceptance letters from universities start rolling in.

The key takeaway is that admission to legitimate universities abroad requires more than a degree and a GPA: it requires a narrative backed up by a portfolio of achievements that tells a believable and comprehensive story about who you are and what drives you. If you are one of the tens of thousands of young people that will leave this country this year or the next, you need to know what admissions teams expect of you.

Like in everything else in life, there will be some people better resourced than you, who will be able to buy themselves advice and ease their way across some hurdles. But if information and preparation are half the battle, the challenge lies in leveling the playing field as much as possible by making this information available to prospective international students that do not have the benefit of deep pockets.

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