

# Why studying abroad is becoming harder for Bangladeshi students

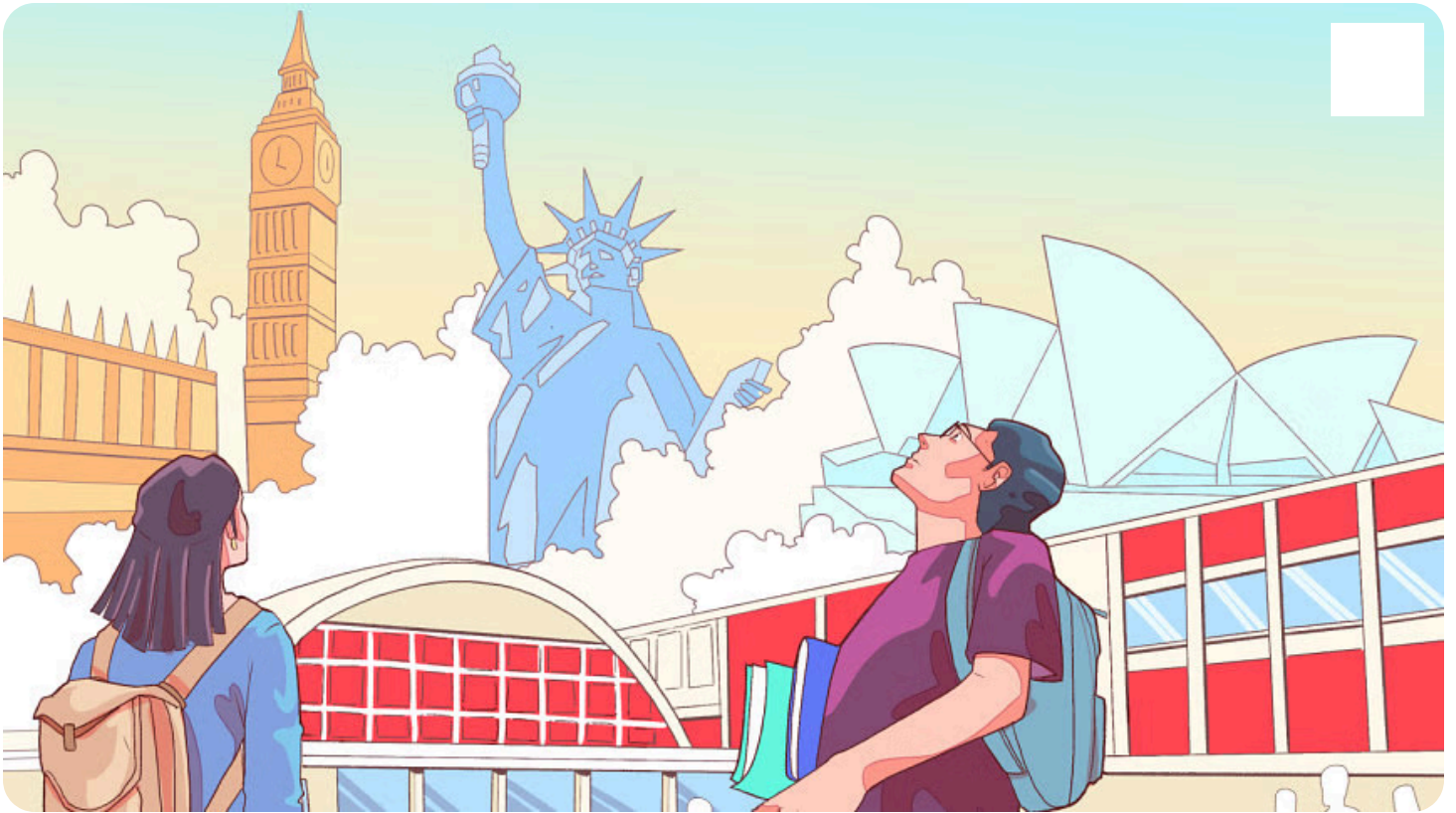


Illustration: Rakeeb Razzaq

Over the past decade or so, there has been a rather noticeable rise in the number of [Bangladeshi students pursuing their undergraduate degrees abroad](#). Destinations like the US, UK, Canada, Australia, and Germany, have been particular favourites amongst those wanting to begin their higher education journey in a foreign country. In recent times, however, these countries have been adopting policies and undergoing changes that are making it harder for Bangladeshi students to go abroad.

## Canada

Canada has been attempting to reduce international student intake for the past two years. In response to the housing and healthcare crises in Canada, where many residents are unable to find affordable housing and health services, Canada mapped out the 2025 to 2027 Immigration Levels Plan to bring down the number of international students making their way into Canada, based upon the belief that the pressure of accommodating international students has resulted in the country's current infrastructural issues.



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At the beginning of 2024, the Canadian administration implemented changes that sought to reduce the number of international study permits by 35 percent. A few months ago, the administration announced it would introduce a further 10 percent reduction in the study permits issued in 2025 and 2026. Needless to say, the ramifications of these decisions have been widely felt.

Orchid Benedict Gomes, a first-year undergraduate student pursuing a Bachelor's in Mechanical Engineering at Toronto Metropolitan University, is one of the countless students affected.

"I had to apply multiple times before I got the acceptance for the study permit, and once I received it, it wasn't offered for the full length – four years – of the course. The permit was offered to me for two years, after which I must apply for an extension. This is a problem because many students fail to receive this extension and are sent back to their countries," Orchid explains.

Anindya Chowdhury, managing partner and CEO of Mentors' Study Abroad, points out, "2024 was a bad year for Bangladeshi students looking to pursue higher studies abroad. Even for students who had the necessary financial documents and who received scholarships, there were study permit rejections. I think we saw a 40 percent decrease in the number of permits granted."

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## Number of students going abroad triples in 15 years despite university boom

| YEAR | NUMBER OF STUDENTS |
|------|--------------------|
| 2022 | 49,151             |
| 2013 | 24,112             |
| 2008 | 16,609             |

Besides, Canada also raised the average living costs that international students have to show on their study permit papers from CAD 10,000 to CAD 20,635, a step that has made Canada a significantly more unreachable destination for many study abroad aspirants.

However, students say that the current living costs are usually less than the number they are asked to show, as most international students don't opt for student residences. Instead, they rent apartments with other students or reside with their extended families living there. This is a substantial financial burden and it becomes difficult for many to show the required funds along with the tuitions for the first semester.

International students have always been a strong source of income for Canadian universities, with most international students paying tuition fees six times the value of the tuition fees paid by Canadian citizens. There is speculation that higher education institutions in Canada will be raising their international tuition fees to counteract their losses from the reduced international student intakes, making it harder for many Bangladeshi students to be able to pay for a Canadian degree. Moreover, Canadian universities are notorious for their near-abysmal scholarship opportunities at the undergraduate level, so students can receive no reprieve from that end either.

Moreover, in the past two years, restrictions have been placed on work permits for spouses of international students. However, now there is also talk of post-graduation work permits (PGWPs) becoming more difficult for students themselves. Orchid expresses his concern in this regard, "I believe the Canadian government will become stricter on the GPA requirements or the type of major you have before granting a PGWP in the future. This will negatively impact the chances of getting permanent residence (PR) in Canada for international students like me who want to settle here after graduation."

On the future of Bangladeshi students in Canada, Anindya says, "Since the beginning of 2025, we have seen a rise in the proportion of study permit acceptances to Canada. However, that could be because fewer students have been applying to Canada to begin with, put off by the fear of harsh permit policies."

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## The unseen challenges of studying abroad



## Australia

Australia has been attempting to follow in the same vein. While there was some talk about the Australian government introducing a cap on the number of incoming international students from 2025, the bill was ultimately not passed but the authorities came back with a new visa processing structure in place of the cap. The new structure might, in turn, result in visa processing delays, with many students having to defer their enrolment.

What Australia may not have been able to do in the form of caps, it has done through a range of other measures already. Aranyo Rishi Chowdhury, a high school graduate who had been hoping to apply to Australian universities this year, explains the reasons behind his determent, "Even though Australia was one of my top choices for pursuing my undergraduate degree, I was put off by the lacklustre scholarship opportunities available. With most meritorious students receiving a maximum of 40 percent scholarship, I simply couldn't afford Australia. I would have to work part-time jobs just to be able to pay off tuition and miss out on all other aspects of my university life."

Not only has the Australian government raised the minimum IELTS score requirement for a student visa from 5.5 to 6, they doubled the student visa application fee from AUD 710 to AUD 1,600 and increased the proof of savings from AUD 24,505 to AUD 29,710 in 2024. This, coupled with the post-pandemic reductions in scholarship opportunities, is certainly discouraging for Bangladeshi students, many of whom can't afford the nearly ostentatious costs of attendance at Australian universities without multiple part-time jobs.

Australia's relatively new Genuine Student Test, as part of their visa interview process, has also been a step the country has taken to curb the number of fraudulent students entering the country just to work low-wage jobs. Quazi Fuad, an incoming freshman at the University of New South Wales, highlights the hurdles he faced with this addition, "I had to write my answers for the Genuine Student Test twice, because my answers weren't good enough, and my agent ultimately ended up having to help me with it."

Additionally, the increasing emphasis on practical, professional degrees and a move away from the humanities and social sciences in countries like Australia and the United Kingdom has meant that universities are subtly discouraging students from studying these subjects which can be a strong negative for students interested in the humanities.

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### **The United Kingdom**

On the UK scene, Anindya comments, "The UK, as a study abroad destination, has become drastically less popular over the past two years because of the restrictions on spouse visas. For those hoping to take their close ones on a dependent visa, recent restrictions have certainly been a massive blow."

International student tuition fees in the UK start from around GBP 13,000 and the average cost would be around GBP 20,000, and students have to carry their living costs on top of that. Scholarship opportunities in the UK at an undergraduate level are almost non-existent, with most universities offering around GBP 3,000 to 7,000 at best, and full tuition or full-ride scholarships being limited to a handful of slots at top colleges with hyper-competitive ratios of acceptance. The rising costs of tuition at many of these universities are not going to be conducive to attracting more international students either.

Rahmin\*, a 12th-grade student hoping to go abroad for her studies this fall, says, "I wanted to go to the UK because their focus on a purely academic education really appeals to me. However, even with very good grades, I don't believe I would have been able to secure the few scholarships that are available in the UK. They are simply too competitive and, unlike the US, there are no need-based scholarships available for international students. My parents would have had to sell off whatever meagre lands they own in their village to be able to even put me through just one year of studies in the UK, particularly with the rising cost of attendance for degrees in the biomedical fields."



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## Navigating the UK undergraduate admission process



Illustration: Fatima Jahan Ena

### The United States

Despite its seemingly attractive need-based scholarships, the US has not been particularly kind to Bangladeshi students either.

"While the number of student visa acceptances has increased, the ratio has decreased. I believe more than 70,000 Bangladeshi students applied last year but only around 14,000 visas were granted. Students are not being able to get visa appointment slots, with many getting dates in 2026," remarks Anindya.

Quazi Fuad, who was initially supposed to attend Arizona State University, says, "I tried to get a visa interview several times but failed. I finally gave up and chose to come to Australia."

It is no surprise that admissions to top American colleges are becoming exponentially more difficult by the day. Tauhid Islam Jami, an incoming freshman at Lafayette College, speaks at length about this, "The number of US applicants has increased drastically in the last few years, making it all the

more competitive. Not just that, while the expected family contribution for an average aid-seeking applicant in the past might have been around USD 15,000, it has now risen to USD 25,000. Institutions are not just looking for students who have better, more holistic, and more unique profiles; they are also looking for applicants who have more money."

Soumya Suvra Das, a 20-year-old applicant, brings up a different point. "President Trump's policies have been nothing short of lunacy so far and the US seems to be headed towards becoming a conservative and capitalistic swamp. This is making me uncertain about a future there and sceptical of my decision to apply."

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### **Germany**

Germany, once a rather popular study abroad option for students looking to get affordable, high-class education, is losing its appeal too. For Sajid Al Irfan Riaz, a first-year undergraduate student at the Islamic University of Technology, studying Mechanical Engineering in Germany was a childhood dream. However, once he was nearing the end of his high school years and started looking into Germany, he was hit by a terribly harsh reality check.

"The official waiting period for German student visas is officially 25 months, give or take three or four months. This has been rising over the past few years. I could not afford to sit around for that long to start my bachelor's. Albeit, for scholarship receivers, there is no waiting period," says Sajid.

Md Emon Shaikh is a student pursuing a Combined Bachelor's in Engineering and Management at Hochschule Merseburg and Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg. He says, "As a bachelor's applicant, I had to apply for an appointment at the German embassy after completing my first year of undergraduate studies. This is because Germany requires Bangladeshi students to have 13 years of education. However, I had to wait for a long time and only received my appointment in my fourth year of university. Due to this delay, I had to arrange various documents proving my student status, including my second- and third-year results."

Moreover, the blocked account requirement – the amount that German authorities require international students to deposit in a special bank account for expenses in Germany per academic year – was also changed recently. In 2020, the blocked account amount needed to be EUR 10,236. This rose to EUR 11,904 in 2024 – a nearly 17 percent increase. Emon says, "As a student from a middle-class family, arranging the required funds was quite challenging for me. The amount – almost BDT 16 lakh – was a significant sum of money for us. However, I managed to arrange it by selling land and taking loans from the bank and relatives."

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## Beyond the usual: Lesser-known destinations for studying abroad



### Finland and Hong Kong

While certainly not conventional, more and more Bangladeshi students have been opting for countries like Finland and Hong Kong for their undergraduate degrees in recent times. However, with Finnish universities introducing an application fee of EUR 100 where it previously used to be free of charge, institutions like Aalto University raising their tuition fees across a range of disciplines and creating new, narrower criteria for scholarships, and the cumbersome situation with Indian visa refusals (as the Finnish Embassy, where students have to receive their residence permits from, is located in India), Finland might soon be out of reach for many Bangladeshi citizens. The near-absent job market for international students after their studies in Finland is also an additional factor to consider for those who might be hoping to settle abroad.

Hong Kong, too, is becoming less lucrative. While many top universities in Hong Kong used to offer full funding for A level students with three A\*s even a few years back, now the requirement has risen to four or five A\*s, making admissions substantially more competitive. The housing situation in Hong Kong is also no longer ideal; many students face much uncertainty about receiving university housing after their first year and external housing is often too pricey. Hong Kong is one of the most expensive cities in the world for foreigners to live in, so without a reasonable scholarship, it might not be a good option for many Bangladeshi students.

There is no denying that studying abroad is becoming difficult for Bangladeshi students and their fates rest almost ubiquitously out of their hands. Students have to consider a variety of factors — escalating costs, increasing competition, limitations on student visas— before making a decision on where to apply. Looking into alternative options such as making the most of the educational opportunities within the country or finding affordable degrees in countries without these issues might be a good idea, particularly given the rising uncertainties surrounding the opportunities in countries that were once most favoured by Bangladeshis.

*\*Names have been changed upon request.*

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