

# Navigating the difficult path of switching one's major

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The circuit lab was a space of quiet dread. While my classmates effortlessly navigated complex engineering problems, I struggled to grasp the most basic concepts. Initially, I thought it happened to everyone, and that I would soon overcome it. But for someone who has always been a serious student, scoring Ds and Es wasn't just an academic hurdle; it was a total identity crisis. Then came a single elective in social science. I aced it, finding a rhythm that had eluded me for years. It was a moment of clarity, yet without a support system to encourage a shift, I remained trapped in a cycle of academic mediocrity. I graduated with frustration, knowing my potential might remain elsewhere, but the path forward seems to be in a haze.

My experience is not unique. In Bangladesh, the transition from high school to university is a narrow funnel, one that is often burdened by a heavy cultural expectation to pursue safe degrees like engineering or medicine. According to the University Grants Commission (UGC)'s 50th Annual Report, the country's public universities offer barely 50,000 seats for first-year (honours) students. When compared to the 13.3 lakh students who sat for the HSC exams in 2024, it becomes clear that only about four to five percent of applicants will ever make it through those gates. This intense competition fosters a survivalist mindset. And, thus, students prioritise passing admission tests over identifying their true passions.



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The pressure of studying a subject that does not resonate with a student's core strengths has a documented impact on mental health. A 2023 study by the Aachol Foundation highlighted that academic pressure and dissatisfaction with chosen fields are leading causes of severe anxiety and depression among university students in Bangladesh. For many, the weight of a four-year degree feels less like a journey of discovery and more like a sentence they must serve.

Ahmed Zulquarnine Chowdhury, a student at BRAC University, is someone who navigated this weight for a long time. He spent seven semesters in Computer Science and Engineering (CSE) before realising he was in the wrong place. For nearly three years, he followed a curriculum that felt like a series of chores rather than a path to a career. His experience at the Mohakhali campus was defined by a mismatch between his interests and the technical rigour of the lab-based environment.

"The moment it became clear to me was when I genuinely started to love learning," Ahmed says. He explains that his time during the residential semester helped him understand that he belonged in a field related to critical thinking and the study of human nature. Switching to Anthropology in his ninth semester

was not an easy choice, especially after spending so much time in CSE. However, he describes the process of switching as a search for mental peace."

Ahmed points out that the administrative side of changing majors at a private university like BRAC University is relatively straightforward. He had to list his completed courses and meet with the programme coordinator of his prospective department. "The coordinator asked me the usual question, including my reasoning for joining Anthropology and leaving CSE," he notes. After getting approvals from both departments and submitting his grade sheet to a dedicated student centre, the switch was official. He did not have to drop a semester, which is a rare feat in the local academic landscape.

Omar Hossain, another seventh-semester student who moved from CSE to Anthropology at BRAC University, describes a similar gradual realisation. His turning point came during late-night coding sessions, where he found he could solve the problems but felt no curiosity about the results. A trip overseas exposed him to people from non-academic backgrounds, making him realise that his current path was not the only way to live.

"It was as though I had been in a black and white film, and all of a sudden somebody flicked on the colour," Omar says of his first Anthropology classroom experience. In his previous department, the world was binary, consisting of only the right or wrong code. In his new department, he found people debating rituals, kinship, and social power. This shift allowed him to view the world differently, even applying anthropological theories to the anime he watches. "I have been able to observe mainstream anime like *One Piece* and *Naruto* as highly anthropological texts," he explains.



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## Do you too regret your university major?

However, Omar admits that the social and familial cost was high. His parents were deeply concerned about his future earning potential, often comparing him to cousins who were already established in the IT sector. "Initially, those remarks were very painful, and they made me feel as though I had failed all the people," he admits. Over time, as he became more engaged and happier with his studies, his family's scepticism began to fade.

Nuzhat Tahsin's move from Economics to Media and Journalism at North South University (NSU) in her third semester highlights the importance of finding a major that matches one's personality. Although Economics is a high-demand field, Nuzhat found the heavy focus on abstract mathematical models and data points disconnected from her passion for social narratives. "I realised that analysing market trends wasn't as fulfilling as documenting the human stories behind those trends," she explains. "Journalism allows me to merge information with a creative, narrative lens that Economics simply couldn't provide."

NSU's framework facilitates such changes after the first semester, provided there are vacant seats in the desired department and the necessary transfer fees are paid. This structured flexibility enabled Nuzhat to transition into a field where her storytelling skills could truly thrive.

In some cases, students do not leave a faculty entirely but switch to a different branch within the same field. Humayera Tabassum Tunan, a recently graduated student from BRAC University, had moved from Electrical and Electronic Engineering (EEE) to CSE during her first year. She felt she could not cope with the requirements of circuit design and lab work. "I already had a pre-existing affinity for programming," she says. Tunan felt that CSE offered more diverse career options and a better fit for her skills.

Some basic courses like C and C++ are common to both departments. While she did exceptionally well in those courses, circuits felt overwhelming to her. Later, she was able to transfer her credits and continue without losing time.



Illustration: Abir Hossain

## What happens in public universities?

While private university students often have the flexibility to change majors after a semester or two, the reality for public university students is far more rigid. Atique Tajwar, a recently graduated student from the Department of Robotics and Mechatronics Engineering (RME) at Dhaka University (DU), explains that the system is built on a series of locked doors. During the admission process, students provide a choice list. If they are assigned a department they dislike, they can only "down-migrate" to a department that was lower on their list, provided that there are vacancies.

"You can only move to a department that was ranked lower on your list, and only if that department's seats aren't already full," Atique explains. This window of opportunity is incredibly small, usually closing before the first-semester exams even begin. Once a student completes their first semester, they are essentially locked into that department for the next four years. If they want to change, their only option is to retake the entire university admission test the following year, which often involves the risk of a "gap year".

Atique also highlights the financial aspect of this academic trap. Many students stay in departments they dislike because they cannot afford the tuition of a private university. They are forced to rely on the reverence of the public institution, even if the curriculum leaves them unhappy. The process of formally cancelling an admission is also a hurdle. To get original transcripts back, students must navigate the administrative inefficiencies of the DU Registrar Building and pay various fees. Many choose to simply stop attending classes instead, leaving the seat vacant and unusable for anyone else.

Nawshaba\*, a second-year student in the Zoology department at Jagannath University, echoes these frustrations. She explains that according to Jagannath University's academic rules, major changes are strictly limited by merit positions and vacancies during the initial admission weeks. For someone stuck in a subject they dislike, the system offers very few exits. "In public universities, the competition is too high," Nawshaba says. She notes that many students spend their lives wanting to study Physics but end up in Zoology because of their merit score.



The vacancy problem is a recurring theme in public institutions. Seats often open up when students leave for medical colleges or other higher-ranked public universities after they are certain that they have secured a seat.

However, because the migration window is so short, these seats often remain empty for the duration of the four-year cycle of a specific department. Atique mentions that in his department, several students left midway through without formally cancelling their admission. This lack of administrative flexibility means that thousands of potential seats across the country go to waste every year, while other students remain trapped in subjects they have no interest in.

The disconnect between a student's passion and their assigned major is a systemic issue that continues to define higher education in Bangladesh. While some manage to navigate the barriers to a different department, many others graduate with a sense of frustration. The stories of those who switched suggest that the risk of changing one's path is often outweighed by the mental peace of finally understanding what one is learning.

Education should be a process of moulding a student's curiosity. Our education system needs to offer us the chance to truly understand where we belong before pushing us into a battle for a single seat against thousands of others. This relentless competitiveness must end to make room for a system that values different passions. Whether in a public or private institution, the ability to pivot is essential for a student's long-term success and mental well-being. Finalising a degree is a milestone, but doing so in a field that ignites curiosity is what truly prepares a graduate for the world outside.

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*\*Name has been changed upon request*

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